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GREY AND GOLD.

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GREY AND GOLD.

BY

EMMA JANE WORBOISE,

AUTHOR OF "SINGLEHURST MANOR," "MARGARET TORRINGTON," "VIOLET
VAUGHAN," "ST. BEETHA'S," "OVERDALE," ETC.



"Golden days—where are they?
Farther up the hill,
I can hear the echo
Faintly calling still;
Faintly calling, faintly dying,
In a far-off misty haze:
Where are they, then, where are they—
Golden days?"

Adelaide Procter.

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GREY AND GOLD.

“Golden days—where are they?
Pilgrims east and west
Cry : if we could find them,
We would pause and rest ;
We would pause and rest a little
From our long and weary ways :
Where are they, then—where are they—
Golden days ?”

A. A. Procter.

CHAPTER I.

ESTHER.

It was the greyest of grey autumnal days—not the sort about which Keble sings so sweetly, wherein the redbreast warbles a cheerful, tender strain, teaching one lessons of peace and patience : “rather in all to be resigned than blest !”—not the grey of a tranquil landscape, with soft mists falling on the lovely-tinted woodlands, and the river gliding calmly through green, silent meadows, and church-bells ringing pensively from some little quaint town on the mountain side ; nor yet the grey of lonely moors and desolate hill-fastnesses, whence all the summer hues have faded ; nor even the steely grey of the cold, wintry sea, when winds are still, and heavy clouds hang low, and, gazing at the far horizon, one cannot tell which is dim, grey sea, or dim, grey, solemn cloud !

It was the last week in October—a cold, rainy, preternaturally hibernal October ; “St. Luke’s little summer” had been missed *altogether*, and it remained only to see *what St. Martin might* do for an expectant world, that

sighed and shivered as it thought of the dark days coming before Christmas. On the particular day of which I speak, it had rained gently, but without intermission, the whole forenoon. Midday had brought some gleams of watery sunshine, but it had soon clouded over again ; and now, though the rain had ceased, it was about as damp and disagreeable as a late October day can make itself—and that is saying a good deal !

A late October day, too, in London !—not at the West-end, either ; not in charmed Belgravian squares and crescents, nor in favoured Tyburnian haunts, where people can sometimes manage to forget the seasons, if they shut themselves indoors, with brilliant fires in shining grates, and plenty of exotics blooming all about them, and a grand pianoforte, and heaps of music, and all the best magazines of the month, and Mudie's newest books lying on the table ! No ! nor yet at breezy Hampstead or Highgate, nor in the classic land of Streatham, nor at royal Richmond, nor anywhere in the beautiful suburbs of our own metropolis ; but in London proper, almost in the city itself, where mist, and rain, and mud—oh, such mud !—do mostly congregate when the old year is in the sere and yellow leaf.

But the yellow leaves now were mostly on the ground—at least they were in Queen Square, W.C. ; the branches of the plane-trees were nearly bare ; the walks of the Square garden were sodden with drippings and long-continued rains ; the last autumnal flowers hung dead and black upon their straggling, withered stalks ; and as for the poor chrysanthemums, they were fated never to bloom at all : cold showers and early frosts, and an almost total failure of sunshine, had nipped their beauties in the bud, and postponed the season of their triumph for another year.

Queen Square, W.C., was, at the time of which I write, scarcely what it is now ; it was not then so utterly deserted and wo-begone ; and a few respectable private families still lingered among its oldest inhabitants. But the days of its prime were long since past ; its glories were faded ; and only *melancholy* reminiscences of its better estate were carefully *preserved and handed down* from father to son by a few who

still clung to the belief that in all London and its environs, from Highgate to Denmark Hill, and from Kensington to Bow, there was not a square like unto it for convenience, and eligibility, and gentility, and general advantages too numerous to be specified ! Were not the houses large and remarkably commodious, some of them very large indeed ? Was it not quiet and almost rural, from May until September ? Was it not unprofaned by vulgar traffic, there being happily “no thoroughfare” at the Guildford Street end ? Had they not Queen Anne perpetually in their midst—a rather stout stone lady, with a small crown upon her head ? Were they not shut out or shut in—it was difficult to say which—from all the turmoil of the city, which yet was so easy of access, inasmuch as you had only to take the turn by the church of St. George the Martyr to get into Southampton Row, and so, by Holborn, whithersoever you pleased ? or, better still, go down Devonshire Street, and cross Red Lion Square, and get into Holborn that way, and take Chancery Lane, bringing you straight upon Temple Bar ? Verily, Queen Square was not to be despised ; though, strange to say, few persons seemed aware of its superior advantages !

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon of that particular October day ; and, standing at the window of the uppermost story of a large, dingy house on the church side of the square, was a girl, who might be from sixteen to seventeen years of age, steadfastly contemplating the heavy clouds, as, in anticipation of the swiftly coming twilight, they gathered over the narrow bounds of sky between Great Ormond Street and Guildford Street. Looking at this girl, you would, I am afraid, feel but small interest in her. No one in his senses, I suppose, would go to Queen Square, W.C., to hunt up a heroine, or, if he did, would choose this particular girl, gazing, with almost a scowl upon her face, at the murky sky, and the chimney tops, and a few fluttering, yellow leaves upon the gaunt, bare plane-trees in the garden. For the face was not charming, though there was something in it that distinguished it at once from a thousand other faces you might call plain or ordinary. Plain I suppose it *was*, but *not* ordinary ; having once seen it, you would not

easily forget it ; it would come to you in your dreams, not quite pleasantly, perhaps ; and if, after the lapse of years, you saw the face again, you would not fail to recognise it, thinking, probably, as you did so, that you had not in all the interval of absence seen a face at all resembling it.

Let me try to describe it. The features were tolerably regular, but hard, and far too strongly marked to be agreeable in youth ; the complexion was very dark and colourless ; the mouth firmly set ; the lips compressed ; the chin resolute, and even obstinate ; the cheek-bones showed painfully, and there were hollows in the temples, all the more visible because the dark, abundant hair was drawn, or rather strained, tightly back from the forehead, and fastened in a slovenly, ungraceful knot at the back of the head. But the head itself was finely formed ; a phrenologist would have been enraptured with it ; the intellectual organs were so beautifully developed—or, rather, in a state to be developed, if only somebody would take a little trouble with them ; but up to this time certainly no one had ever given himself, or herself, any trouble in the matter. Meanwhile, the massiveness of the brow gave one only the idea of heaviness and sullenness, which was in no wise an improvement to the singular, unprepossessing face. The eyes were grey, of a soft, shadowy hue ; many persons thought they were black, as they glanced out, sometimes in wrath, and sometimes in weary scorn, from the fringes of long, dark, curled eyelashes ; but they were not black, or brown, or blue, but veritable, clear, full *grey* ! which Byron declared was, after all, the only really expressive colour for eyes ! I think, in default of any other simile, I would call this girl's eyes iron-grey.

Being rather tall, and very thin, and extremely awkward, I cannot say that Esther Kendall had any sort of figure that could redeem the plainness of her countenance. Her hands, indeed, were shapely ; but, oh ! such a colour. Well ! when you come to know all she did with those long, brown fingers, and all she held and grasped with those lean, *rough palms*, you will not be astonished at their want of *delicacy*. One cannot very well “put one's hands to any-

thing" in a house where there are two sets of lodgers and any number of children, and only one toiling, moiling maid-of-all-work to cook, and wait, and wash up, and scrub and scour from the garret to the basement, and keep the said hands soft and sleek and fair. Well! brown, grimed hands are sometimes more to be commended than dainty ones that are tender and snowy from their very uselessness.

I rather think Esther had pretty slender feet, with a high arched instep, and ankles that might have been favourably criticised had she been a ballet-girl; but just now one could not find that out, for she wore old, patched, stuff boots that had never been made for her, and they were fastened up the sides after a fashion—that is, with rusty, knotted, disreputable laces, revealing, too, coarse grey worsted stockings that sadly cried out for the darning needle. Her dress was a dark Coburg merino of antiquated make, if, indeed, it could be said to be of any make at all, seeing that it had been "done up" at least half-a-dozen times, in which economical processes the dressmaker's original design had been quite lost by reason of patchings and clippings, and contrivances more ingenious than effective. It was evidently now in its last days, for it was dirty, and limp, and torn, and would not bear another *ri-facimento*; and it was frayed in the arms, and out of the gathers in the skirt, which had a natural fringe of its own all round the hem; and it had been torn in nearly every breadth, and cobbled up again *anyhow*, with any sort of cotton, and in any sort of way that was simply expeditious.

It was a good-sized room in which Esther Kendall was standing, and it held two beds and a crib, one washing-stand, that had long ago been painted yellow, with brown lines by way of ornamentation, displaying also a white basin, with a large piece out of the rim, a green ewer without a handle, and two saucers, one pink, and containing a quantity of fine sand, the other blue, holding a goodly square of common yellow soap. There was no towel-horse, but something that did duty as a chamber napkin hung over the back of one of the *two broken chairs* that the garret boasted. A *deal dressing-table*, that must have been doing battle with

other pieces of furniture ever since it was a table ; a looking-glass, six inches square, cracked right across the middle, and somewhat deficient in the matter of quicksilver ; a chest of drawers, supposed to be *en suite* with the washing-stand, only its normal colour was drab, and its lines and scrolls of a sickly, faded green ; and a large, purple-papered box, with sundry shattered bandboxes, completed the appointments of Miss Kendall's bedchamber.

Alas ! it was only her bedchamber by courtesy ; it was called " Esther's room " simply because she always slept in it, not because anyone, least of all herself, imagined her to have any exclusive right to it at any hour of the night or the day. Who slept in the two beds and the one crib ? I will tell you, for then you will the better understand her position in the family of which she was a member. In the larger bed, with the checked curtains and the queer counterpane, all little yellowish-brown fuzzy knots, on a dingy purple ground, slept Esther Kendall and her cousin Eliza Hellicar, commonly known in the house as " Lizzie," a young lady of twelve years of age, and of unpromising disposition. In the second bed, with the patchwork coverlet and no hangings, reposed Biddy, the Irish maid-of-all-work, a honest, hardworking, faithful girl, but slatternly in the extreme, and with no particular views on the subject of cleanliness ; also Fanny Hellicar, aged five, given to having bad dreams, and to waking up in consequence thereof soon after midnight in a state of highly demonstrative and inconsolable grief, and in extreme disturbance of mind, *alias* temper. Last of all, in the crib, slumbered Tommy Hellicar, a sturdy young urchin of three, said by his ma' to be of an uncommonly sensitive nature, and of highly nervous temperament, as, indeed, he was if you had the temerity to thwart him in the least particular. The other occupants of that chamber would have rejoiced greatly if Master Tommy had gone to sleep in any other quarters, and I am afraid they would not have grieved very much had he gone to sleep in a bed so cold and so dark that he would never have disturbed them any *more*.

Now, Esther Kendall had come upstairs to dress ; that is,

to perform certain necessary ablutions, and to change her disreputable morning-frock for one more decent and a trifle smarter; but, instead of making her toilet with all speed, she loitered at the open window, watching the dark wrack of clouds, and listening to "The light of other days," which an organ-grinder was performing on the wet pavement far below. Also she was meditating, and cogitating, and wondering in her own peculiar, fierce, wild way; and thus she soliloquised:—"Stupid square! stupid trees! stupid Queen Anne! stupid houses! stupid sky, and stupid earth! how I hate you all! Stupid, grey, dull, wearisome existence! What have *I* done that I should live such a life? Why should I be a drudge, a slave, an unpaid menial, an upper servant in a shabby lodging-house, with plenty to do, no time of my own, and no wages? Bed and board indeed! well, I don't care about the board: there is enough of it, and it is good enough of its sort; and the bed is all very well, I should not sleep any sounder under damask hangings, and a silken quilt. But I should like a bed to myself, if it were only a mattress and a blanket; and a room of my very own, if it were only a closet as big as a good-sized cupboard! Clothes, indeed! cast-off things like these; there is not a girl goes to church on Sundays half as shabby as I am! Here it is almost November, and I am wearing the same faded, dirty pink bonnet, that had seen all its best days before it came to me! And I suppose I shall get no winter cloak or shawl; there is still the old red thing hanging up in the lower passage—the parish shawl, it ought to be called, for I couldn't count how many people have worn it in these last six years that it has been public property; and that is good enough for *me*! oh, yes, quite good enough for a girl that has neither father, nor mother, nor friends, nor home, nor money of her own: only her fingers, that she works to the bone, and her brains, that ache with the incessant clatter, and confusion, and quarrelling, and scolding,—oh dear, yes; quite good enough! who says it isn't?"

There was an intense bitterness in her tone—her dark grey eyes were *flashing out her heart's concentrated scorn*; her *slight fingers interlaced each other*, as if she suffered bodily;

and, when she ceased to speak, her teeth were firmly set, as if in resolute endurance, and mute defiance of some great and cruel wrong. Poor child ! for she was but a child, in spite of her sixteen years and six months, and in spite of her London rearing, and her hard service in a London lodging-house. She was weary of her dull, grey, monotonous life—wearied of its toil, wearied of its restraint, wearied of its injustice, and, above all things, wearied of its utter hopelessness ! If there had been one break in the heavy clouds of her horizon, one little streak of blue, one solitary ray of sunshine, to tell her of a good time coming, I think she would have borne on better ; for she was really a brave girl, and not at all afraid of work, and she would have waited quietly, and with every show of outward submission, with a stern resolve and dogged patience all her own, if she had had the least idea what she was to wait for !

Wearily she took off the old brown dress, and hung it up on its accustomed peg, with a glance of unmitigated disgust ; slowly she washed her dirty face and hands, striving in vain with the sand to scour out some of the grimes, and efface the stains upon the palms and fingers ; and, with a listlessness not at all in keeping with her budding womanhood, she donned the nondescript coloured alpaca gown, and the crochet collar, and the cheap blue ribbon, which was her ordinary evening costume. As for her hair, she just gave it a stroke or two with the brush, and fastened it up behind in a tight thick plait, instead of a loose knot ; then she put on a much worn and much darned black silk apron, trimmed with cotton velvet and imitation lace, and her toilet was complete.

It was nearly dark now ; but instead of going down she turned again to the open window, and again poured out her complainings to herself, as she was very much in the habit of doing, for lack of any other auditor. “I wouldn’t care for anything,” she exclaimed, as she clenched the damp, discoloured window-sill, “if only I *knew* something. I am nearly as ignorant as Biddy. Except that I speak differently and *feel* differently, I don’t see that there is much difference *between us* ; for she can read and write after a fashion, and *add up pence and shillings*, and see that the milkwoman and

the baker's boy don't cheat. And what can I do more that a lady ought to do? A lady, indeed, that is a pretty joke, calling myself a lady! I, Esther Kendall, nursing horrid children, and cleaning rooms, and cooking at all hours of the day, and sewing, and waiting upon insolent lodgers—at everybody's beck and call. A pretty lady, indeed! But I would work, and never complain, if I might only learn something. If I learned a little I could get on, I know; I could learn more. But there, it's of no use; I might as well wish to build a new bridge over the Thames as want to learn anything that can ever do me any good. It's years and years since I went to school, and I was only sixteen last April; many a girl of my age is going to school still, or taking lessons, or doing something to fit her for the world; while I—I '*finished*,' as Lizzie calls it, just about nine years ago. I suppose I was nearly seven and a half when I left Miss Smithson's seminary. Fortunately I was a good child at my book, and learned as much or more than most children of that age; for certainly if I had not learned to read and spell I should never have learned since. Ah! what hard work it has been not to forget. If I were a boy, now, my way would be quite clear. Oh! if I were but my own brother—only I never had one—I would not stop in this weary, dreary house another week. I would go out and see what the world is like, and I would do any honest work, and get on, and rise, and make myself a place in society; though what society is like I have not a notion, only my aunt, as I call her—my uncle's wife—talks about it sometimes when we are alone, and she is in her best temper; and so I gather that '*society*' means people, and not a place, or any set of places. To hear her talk she must have been very grand indeed in her young days, going about to balls, and parties, and concerts and all. My uncle says she was very handsome when he first saw her. Perhaps she was; I suppose she did not look so sharp and sour when she was a girl. I wish she had let me be confirmed last month; I might have learned something, and I must have had a new frock. I believe it was in consideration of the frock, *and the time it would take going to the examinations, that made her put me off.* She said I was not steady

enough ; but that was an untruth, for I am as steady as any old grandmother, just because I feel no spirits to be anything but steady. Even Biddy's fun and joking makes me feel quite sick. Oh ! I wonder what it is to feel *young*, as other girls do feel, I know. Again I say, I wish I were a boy. A girl, poor thing, can risk nothing ; I do know just enough to be aware that I should most likely lose my character if I went off and tried to get my living away from my relatives. A girl of sixteen can't be without a decent shelter ; she can't sleep anywhere at night, and go anywhere by day, looking out for work, as a boy of the same age might do. It's very unfair. But sometimes, in spite of all, I think I shall run away at last. One could but starve, though starving, I suppose, is horrible. Perhaps, if I had nowhere to go to, the police would take me up, and then the magistrates would insist on knowing my name, and I should be sent back here covered with disgrace, and be worse off than I am now. No, running away won't do—at least not yet. I *will* get some learning ; I'll talk to my aunt about it this very evening ; I'll speak to my uncle ; I'll get Lizzie to teach me all she knows ; I'll do anything, and bear any taunts and scoldings, and work harder than I've ever worked, but I *will* get some book-learning ! I'll make myself fit for a better place than this. When one is determined one can always do something. Ah ! but I have been determined before, and it all came to nothing. I could get no teaching from anybody, and if they see me with a book in my hand how they do go on ! anybody would think that I always wanted bad and wicked books, to hear them talk. They allow me only my Bible on Sundays, and a short time for that ; and my Prayer-book in church time ; and if I do pick up a book by stealth Lizzie and Fanny always tell of me. There's only Biddy I can depend upon ; and Dick, oh, yes, Dick would take my part ; but somehow I don't want him to, for I *hate him !* ”

“ Esther ! ” cried a sharp, shrill voice behind her, “ ma' says she wonders you ain't ashamed of yourself, wasting your time up here. It's an hour since you came upstairs, if it's *five minutes*. I have been home from school these five-and-*twenty minutes*, and I've had to see to Tommy, and to

help Biddy with Mr. Macgregor's dinner, and to dust the drawing-room ; and you're to come down this very minute, ma' says."

The speaker was a little girl, extremely diminutive for her twelve years, but looking as much like an incipient shrew as it is possible to imagine. She had a very sharp chin, and a very sharp nose, and little sparkling black eyes like jet beads, with a decided tendency to squint. This, of course, was Lizzie Hellicar—Miss Hellicar, as she called herself, and as she was styled by her governess and her companions ; and she never failed to proclaim her superiority over her cousin, and to comport herself as the eldest daughter of the house on every occasion. Esther took no notice of the pert little creature ; she did not answer her, she never even looked at her ; but she closed the window, and ran downstairs with a terrible scowl upon her face and covert rebellion in her soul.

CHAPTER II.

THE HELLICAR HOUSEHOLD.

MRS. HELLICAR contented herself with a fierce but brief onslaught against the loiterer. The fact was, she had too much in hand to be able to indulge comfortably in a thorough-going temper. She had not just then the time to bewail Esther's shortcomings, or to "speak her mind"—her favourite diversion when she had nothing else to do, or to go through the catalogue of Esther's sins of omission and commission, and her offences, real and imaginary, for the last nine years, which was also one of her favourite pastimes when poorly, or "put about," or out of spirits, from causes physical or mental ; or even to administer the proper amount of reprimand, with reflections upon her own saintly walk and conversation, and the state of perdition to which Esther was evidently tending ; neither had the girl time to listen to her, for her services were urgently required, and the minutes were too precious to be wasted, or spent in aught but speedy action. Besides, a good scolding will always keep. It

evaporates, I know, with certain natures ; but with a downright sour, shrewish, miserable temper, it will keep for any length of time, and be ready for use whenever a propitious hour arrives.

“ Here’s a pretty mess, and you idling upstairs, and Biddy with the toothache and a gathered thumb, and so dirty she’s not fit to answer the door to a tax-collector. There, read that, and bestir yourself.”

Esther took from her aunt a neat-looking letter, bearing a country post-mark, and addressed in a very pretty, lady-like hand to Mrs. Hellicar. At the top of the sheet of note-paper was a crest in dark blue, and round it, in a sort of scroll, these words, “*In te Domine speravi.*” Esther read :—

“ MY DEAR MADAM,

“ We have received a letter from Mr. York, which imperatively hastens our movements. Important business requires my father’s presence in town several days earlier than was anticipated. We shall, therefore, make our journey to-morrow, instead of on Friday ; and we shall be in Queen Square as soon as possible after half-past five, at which time our train will be due at Paddington. May I ask you to be particular that our rooms, especially my father’s chamber, should be thoroughly aired ? My dear father, I grieve to say, is frequently an invalid. We are very sorry to have to enter upon our apartments so abruptly, and, we fear, to inconvenience you ; but unless we go to a hotel, which we wish to avoid, we cannot help it. Please to have some tea ready for us.

“ Yours very truly,

“ FLORENCE GUISE.”

“ There, don’t stand staring at Miss Guise’s letter, but think what’s to be done. Here it is hard upon five, and they’ll be in the house in half an hour, and nothing ready for them,” cried Mrs. Hellicar, almost hysterically. Ill-natured people generally lose their presence of mind in an emergency.

“ No, it will be near half-past six. The train very likely won’t be to its time. Then there’s the seeing to the luggage, and getting the cab, and they will be three-quarters of an *hour upon the road*. What a pretty, clear hand Miss Guise writes ! ”

“Never mind Miss Guise’s writing, but go and see if Biddy has lighted the fires yet ; and take off the ottoman covers, and rub up things a little, and then get out the linen for the beds, and have it aired. Dear, dear ! and I dare say the chimney will smoke ; I meant to have it swept to-morrow. They might have stayed till Friday : very inconsiderate—very inconsiderate indeed ; but then these old maids never think of anybody but themselves. We ought to have had the letter this morning, too ; I dare say they forgot to post it. Now do stir yourself, Esther, and try to be of some use for once in your life.”

Mrs. Hellicar was a faded beauty, in bad health. She had really been very pretty once, though people always said that a certain sharpness of feature, and a certain termagant expression in the eye, spoiled her ; but she had been as pretty as a very lovely complexion, and eyes that were bright enough, if they were sometimes fiery, and a profusion of rich, chestnut-brown, curling hair, could make her. She was a spoiled and petted child, and she had been brought up to estimate her own charms at a sufficiently high rate. She was one of those unfortunate people who are always anxious about their “position” being properly recognised ; who have constant “claims” upon certain people, and upon society at large ; and whom, as a rule, the world treats badly.

She had had many suitors, of course ; was there ever a pretty girl, with expectations, and flirting propensities, who had not as many *beaux* as she could manage ? Myra Clarkson, with her long, shining curls, and her hazel eyes, and her delicate rose-bloom and ninimy-pinimy features, and her gay dresses, and her reputation as an heiress, and her passion for admiration, was one of the last to be overlooked by the unwedded ones of the superior sex. She had more lovers at one time than she could count upon her fingers ; she numbered among her devotees a briefless barrister, a young surgeon—so handsome and irresistible in his ways, that he killed his young lady patients by the score—that is, he killed them as Cupid slays his victims ; an elderly curate, with no chance of preferment, and with no particular talent for *preaching* ; a thriving hop-grower, on whose broad bosom—

and he was forty-five—Love's darts had hitherto gleamed harmlessly ; a Methodist baker, with so huge a trade, that one could almost forgive the bread-cart, though Myra never could ; clerks in offices, too numerous to specify ; young men whose business was a mystery ; and middle-aged men and widowers who urged their steadiness, and would be pleased to make a settlement !

But Myra had no idea of hastily relinquishing her liberty ; and the more lovers she secured, the more exalted opinion she entertained of her pretensions, and the more strenuously she resolved to wed only with him who should deserve her beauty and her wealth !

At last, however, the vain coquette was caught ; she discovered, or fancied she discovered, that she had a heart ; and she engaged herself, with the consent of the pair whose adopted child she was, to a young man, who was not the richest or the most fashionable of her admirers, but endowed with a certain something—effrontery, perhaps—which won for him the affections of the difficult Miss Clarkson. But Myra, though she loved the man as much as a silly, frivolous young woman could love, was by no means satisfied with his position, or with his views as to what was essential to commencing married life with suitable *éclat*. After a while she began to miss the excitement of making conquests ; she began to suspect that she was throwing herself away ; she was constantly sighing over what might have been had she only encouraged so-and-so, and hinting even now that she might, but for her engagement, marry to her carriage and pair, and her own maid, and be “my lady !” Naturally, the young man resented these suggestions, and he and Myra quarrelled, and made it up again, and then fell out afresh, and were once more reconciled ; and Myra showed symptoms of fickleness, till the betrothed wisely resigned his claims ; and Myra found herself in the unenviable position of Bon Gaultier's heroine, who made her moan—

“ He said that I was proud, mother, that I looked for rank and gold ;
 He said I did not love him—he said my words were cold ;
He said I kept him off and on, in hopes of higher game,
And it may be that I did, mother, but who hasn't done the same ?

“I did not know my heart, mother : I know it now too late ;
I thought that I, without a pang, could wed some nobler mate ;
But no nobler suitor sought me, and he has taken wing,
And my heart is gone, and I am left a lone and blighted thing.”

Not that Myra was so ingenuous in the case of her recusant lover ; it was one of her maxims that you never gain anything by owning yourself in the wrong, however wrong you may be ; and upon this belief she acted, and bewailed her cruel fate without confessing even to herself that she *had* meant to have him, *if no one more eligible offered*.

How Myra met with Mr. Hellicar I do not know ; but he was a widower with one little boy, and apparently prosperous, for he had just received a considerable legacy, bequeathed to him by a distant relative. He was of showy exterior, and of plausible manner, but weak-minded and irresolute to a proverb ; and he was one of those unlucky ones who never thrive, and always fail, whatever be their opportunities or their advantages. Some men begin life with *threepence* ! and they buy lucifer-matches therewith, and double their capital the first day ; that is the orthodox manner, I believe ; and they go on doubling till the habit of getting cent. per cent. for their money becomes so inveterate that they cannot shake it off, and so they die *millionaires*, and are honourably buried, and their fame is chronicled for the benefit of generations yet unborn !

But the *millionaire's* son, who inherits the million and hates the name of lucifer-matches, manages to do the “cent. per cent.” inversely. Whatever he spends he spends recklessly and foolishly ; whatever he risks he loses ; for every thousand wherewith he speculates in the most paying concern that the century has known, he finds himself minus a couple of thousands ; and so, as even a million of money *can* be spent, or a billion either, I suppose, if you are only lavish and foolish enough, the child of wealth finds himself presently a needy man : and he goes on to become more needy, more unlucky, more hopelessly involved, till ruin comes, and, not having *backbone* enough to grapple with it, *he succumbs, and sinks and sinks till he dies, without*

threepence in his pocket, and a pauper's funeral is the last act and scene before the curtain falls !

Mr. Hellicar was in some sort a man of this calibre, only he never inherited a million of money, and he came of an old, respectable Somersetshire family, who had been well-to-do a century before lucifer-matches were invented. But various legacies fell to his share, and he enjoyed a pretty liberal education, and he married a tidy little fortune in the person of Jane Kendall, Esther's real aunt, her father's own beloved sister. Somehow, though, money would not abide with him ; the old adage about riches making to themselves wings and flying away seemed literally true in his case ; for his gold and his silver, and his crisp bank-notes, vanished, he never knew precisely how or when ! He was credulous, vain, fond of ease, given to day dreams, and lamentably sanguine : and, for his sins, he married, as his second wife, pretty Myra Clarkson. Myra's fortune turned out to be far less than he had anticipated ; but that was really of very little consequence ! Such as it was, he, with her consent, invested it in a capital thing, that was to turn out a perpetual gold-mine—only the mine, or whatever it was, instead of yielding gold, greedily swallowed it up, and Myra's fortune disappeared.

Mr. Hellicar quickly found himself in uncomfortable circumstances. He had no money, and little judgment ; he had a wife who loudly declared her right to be a lady, and who demanded a good house in a good neighbourhood, a well-replenished wardrobe, a cook, a housemaid, and a page at least ! She demanded much, and contributed nothing—nothing except children, and of these she had any number ; as years went on poor Hellicar could never count them. There was Dick, his eldest—poor Jane's boy ! But how many there were of Myra's brood he really could not tell. He only knew they were always coming, and Myra was always ill and weak, and never strong enough to nurse her babies ; always a slattern, except on particular occasions, when she would ruin him in finery and gewgaws, and *always*—as her temper grew with years and untoward circumstances more acid—cross-grained and vixenish.

She had something to complain of, perhaps ; since it is the duty of husbands to keep the mill going, and this husband of hers let the wheels stand still continually for want of grist. Not but what he tried many modes of gaining a honourable livelihood, and some few, I am afraid, that were not strictly honourable ; not but what he struggled now and then, when something roused him—as, for instance, when twins were born, and not only had the doctor's customary fee to be omitted, but the house was bare of necessaries and the cash-box empty. Not but what upon occasion he could and did put his shoulder to the wheel ; but he soon tired of the unwonted exertion ; perhaps the wheel galled or grazed his shoulder : it does serve shoulders so sometimes, especially if they have been more accustomed to luxurious lounging on downy cushions than to upheaving heavy, clumsy wheels deep sunken in the ruts. But, as he told his friends, his luck was always against him, and nothing he put his hand to prospered, though other men took up the very projects he had been compelled to renounce, and carried them to a triumphant issue. Perhaps these “other men” had more patience, more discrimination than Mr. Hellicar. Perhaps, also, they had wives who helped them and encouraged them, and did their part in the solemn compact they had entered into at the marriage altar.

Whatever were the reasons, these “other men” succeeded and Mr. Hellicar did not ; and, as the affairs of men are likened to a tide, it came to pass that the tide of his affairs, never tending to the flood, was always on the ebb, and a very low ebb indeed it grew to be. The house in Queen Square, taken in more palmy days, was still kept on, for it was large, and they could let the drawing-room floor very profitably. By-and-by, as means decreased and the family increased, the dining and breakfast rooms were also let to lodgers, and more and more bedrooms were turned to profit, till at length there remained to the Hellicars only the garrets and the basement story, and they stowed themselves away to the best of their ability.

Esther's father had died nine years ago, and for once Mr.

Hellicar had insisted on having his own way, and bringing his orphan niece to form one of his household. Whatever were his faults he was kind-hearted, and generous even ; but then, unfortunately, he never learnt to be just before he practised his favourite virtue—generosity. There was a talk of sending little Esther to school when first she came, and she was to go as soon as baby number two could walk, for she had at once been promoted to the rank of honorary nursemaid. But ere baby number two could toddle from chair to chair, baby number three put in an appearance ; and before he had well resigned himself to the pangs of cutting his teeth, baby number four was in existence. So it went on, till Esther hated the bare mention of babies, and took the advent of one as a positive injustice to herself. Besides, as she grew older, she was useful in a hundred ways, for Mrs. Hellicar only gave orders. “Brought up as she had been, it was not to be expected,” &c. And so Esther waited on the lodgers, and helped Biddy—helped her in downright good earnest, and pretty extensively too, and made herself, as advertisements say, “generally useful.” Only, of course, she had no wages.

A few days before this grey October afternoon, when my story really begins, a certain lawyer, Mr. York, had engaged the drawing-room floor for a client of his, who would have to be in London for some months on important legal business. He wanted to be near Mr. York’s office and the courts of law. So the rooms in Queen Square were selected in preference to others more distant from Gray’s Inn.

CHAPTER III.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

By dint of putting the best foot foremost, Esther and Biddy, with a little meretricious assistance from Lizzie, succeeded in getting the drawing-room and two bed-rooms into tolerable *order*. *Of course*, it was a very makeshift sort of business *after all*, and Biddy loudly deplored the prevention of the

“thorough claning” she had meant to bestow upon the apartments before the new tenants took possession.

“To think now,” she said regretfully, “that I should have got in the soft soap, and a new scrubbin’ brush and scourin’ flannel, yesterday was a fortnit. Oh, it’s the unlucky woman that I always am, Miss Esther!” It should be remarked that Biddy O’Flanigan always gave Esther the full benefit of the *th* in her name; she never pronounced it Ester or Esta after our English fashion.

“Let this teach you not to be always putting work off,” replied Esther, with the sagacious air of a young Mentoria. “If you had cleaned these rooms last week, when I spoke about it, and when I was quite ready to help you, it would have been all right now.”

“Thru for ye, Miss Esther, an it’s meeself, Biddy O’Flanigan, that wishes I’d bin more bidable. Shure, and all the antimagarics is in the wash, worse luck; they was to have comed home to-morrow. What will we do, Miss Esther dear?”

“Just do without them, if really they are all gone to the wash; but I feel sure Mrs. Hellicar can find one or two best ones. She won’t mind bringing them out for these people; they seem to be such first-rate folks, and if we make them comfortable they will stay all the winter, and longer—eight or nine months, Mr. York expected.”

“Yes, and they said nothin’ about comin’ down in the price, bekase they would stay so long. Most people, when they’re told that these illigant and commojous apartments are two guineas a week, ses, ‘But if I stays for three months, you’ll make a difference, Misthress Hellicar!’ And ses she, ‘I will,’ or ‘I won’t,’ jest accordin’ as she sees they’ll take it. A very knowledgeable woman—I mean lady, shure—is the misthress; and it’s a very purty edication she must have had in her young days; leastways, she’s not to call ould now; but—”

“That will do, Biddy; you waste too much time in talking. Go now to my aunt, and ask if we may have the new antimacassars that Miss Lizzie did at school last half. Make haste, or they will be here; it has gone the half-past.”

Biddy posted away. She generally obeyed Esther, though she and the "misthress" had words often, and were going to part at the month's end times without number, and though she resented the smallest interference from Lizzie, even when she came as a delegate from her mother. Esther, left alone, went again through the rooms, giving a finishing touch here and there, and lamenting that she had not worried Biddy into the "great claning" as soon as ever the apartments were secured. They looked pretty comfortable in the ruddy firelight, with the gas just lighted, and ready to be turned on. The curtains were drawn; the tea-tray, with its best china service, was on the table, and the easy chair stood invitingly upon the hearth. Esther drew from her pocket Miss Guise's letter, and, kneeling down before the blaze, read it in the firelight. There was something in it that pleased her amazingly—whether it was the cream-tinted note-paper, or the stamped crest and motto, then far from common, as it is now; or the slight delicate perfume that lingered about it, or the clear, flowing writing, or all combined, that made this letter seem so different from other letters, she could not tell. She wished Miss Guise was not an old maid; for her aunt had succeeded in impressing upon her mind that old maids were disagreeable, crusty, fidgetty people, giving all the trouble they could, and bestowing no equivalent in return. Mrs. Hellicar never minded how much trouble the lodgers gave, provided they paid for it; for the trouble, whatever it might be, never came upon her shoulders, never taxed her time or temper; for it was not to be expected that *she*, who had once been the admired Miss Clarkson, should have anything to do with *lodgers*, except to stipulate for as much money as she could hope to get from them, and to receipt the bills, and send up genteel messages when any items were disputed.

"But," said Esther, as she folded the letter, which she had appropriated to herself, though it was addressed to her aunt, "that old maid, Miss Prichett, was really kind to me; and I am sure to be an old maid myself! Of course I could *get married* presently, but to whom? To Dick, I suppose, *or to somebody like him—and I hate Dick!* I hate the

whole set of the Hellicars, except, perhaps, my uncle ; but then I don't respect him—poor henpecked, maudlin creature that he is ! I heard it said, the other day, that womanly women make manly men ; I don't believe anything could make my uncle Richard a manly man ! How he does want backbone ! I have backbone enough, I fancy ; but what's the use of being strong when your hands and feet are tied ? What's the use of strength if you can only work the treadmill with it ? Hark ! there's a cab turning the corner of Devonshire Street ! Here they are ! ”

Yes ! the new lodgers had arrived, but not in a cab ; a brougham had been sent to meet them at Paddington, and their belongings came in quite a procession of cabs. Mrs. Hellicar was so alarmed when she saw them, that she was very nearly dropping the baby into a bucket of dirty water, left in the way by careless Biddy ; and the small creature, feeling itself jerked, began to scream, as only exasperated babies and locomotives can scream, to the great chagrin of its mamma, who had rather deceived Mr. York in respect of the number of children in the house. Fortunately, some of the young Hellicars had departed this mortal life ; otherwise I am sure no lodger, not afflicted with deafness, would have remained under the same roof with them longer than a week !

Out of the brougham came an elderly gentleman, tall and stately, but slightly bowed, as if with weakness. He was singularly handsome, and had the bearing of one accustomed to much deference. After him descended a lady—his daughter, of course, the old maid, the Miss Guise who had written the letter ! Yes, Miss Guise, undoubtedly, the daughter and only surviving child of Walter Guise ; but not exactly an old maid ; for maids of nineteen may be considered quite young, and that was rather more than Florence Guise's age. She followed her father into the house, and, throwing back her veil, showed to Esther, and Dick, and Biddy, and Mr. Hellicar, a fair young face, fresh and blooming as the May, with sweet violet eyes, coral lips, and a profusion of the loveliest golden-brown hair. She was simply but elegantly *dressed in slight mourning*, and her movements *were singularly graceful*.

"Papa, dear, take my arm!" she said, springing to her father's side. "Oh, those cabs! I quite forgot—will you pay the men, please?" And she put her purse into Esther's hand.

"Let me!" cried Dick, trying to take the well-filled purse from his cousin.

But Esther's fingers were strong, and they closed down decisively on the handsome Russia-leather purse, as she replied, "No, Dick! the money was left with me, and I am responsible; therefore I will not part with it."

"Do you think I want to steal any of it?"

"I don't care to say what I think! You are not over particular, you know; and I keep the purse."

"Nonsense, Esther," interposed Mr. Hellicar; "what can a girl like you know about cab fares? Besides, it is not proper for you to be at the street-door bargaining with men. Give me the purse."

"I will not," returned Esther, firmly; "uncle, you know you always——*make mistakes* when you have to pay away other people's money."

She looked so gravely and unflinchingly into Mr. Hellicar's face that his eyelids fell and his weak mouth showed symptoms of emotion; he slunk away and began to help Dick with the heavy packages the men were bringing to the door. Esther tied her handkerchief over her head and went out into the open air to settle with the cab-drivers. Something told her that Miss Guise would wish these men to be paid their righteous due to the utmost, and a little over; but when they began to be extortionate she gave them to understand that she knew what she was about, and that any attempt to impose upon her would lamentably fail. There was nothing in the world Esther hated like *imposition*. So the men, seeing that they had a strong-minded young woman to deal with, were content to receive their outside fare, and a handsome gratuity besides; and, all the luggage being safely deposited in the hall, they drove away, leaving Queen Square once more in solitude and silence.

"*Tell Miss Guise we'll fetch a porter to haul up these boxes,*" said Dick, with a knowing wink, as Esther went.

upstairs to restore the purse, and give in her account, also to receive orders. Esther knew that Dick and his father would do the hauling, but that two porters would be charged for in the bill. Well ! that was not so bad, for work of any sort deserves wages ; only why not make the claim openly and fairly ? Mr. Hellicar was a "commission agent" by profession, or by trade, whichever it may be, and a very dirty trade he made of it. He and his son Dick had the oddest ideas possible about "commission ;" their rule was to take their commission upon all transactions ; and some very curious transactions they had, so curious that it is wonderful that they were not sometimes professionally investigated.

When Esther went into the drawing-room, Mr. Guise was lying back in the easy chair, and his daughter was kneeling before him. She had thrown off her bonnet, and her long, bright hair was hanging in rippling waves and loose curls about her shoulders ; she was certainly kissing and caressing her father's hand when Esther stood at the door, and her sweet face was full of love and tenderness.

"Oh, thank you !" she said, in a voice that somehow made Esther think of the birds, and the flowers, and the pleasant summer sunshine ; "thank you for taking the trouble off my hands. You see, I never hired a cab before, and papa was so wearied with the journey I could not let him exert himself. Papa had severe rheumatic fever a year ago, and this last spring he had a nervous attack, so I am obliged to take great care of him. Will you make us some tea, please, Miss Hellicar ?"

"My name is not Hellicar. I am Esther Kendall. Please call me Esther."

Esther tried to speak graciously, for there was something in this radiant, gentle creature that took her heart by storm ; but not being used to graciousness, either in an active or a passive form, she only succeeded in being stiff and blunt.

"There," said Miss Guise, taking the cup from Esther's willing hands, "thank you, Esther. Drink it at once, papa darling ; and see, I have some of your particular biscuits remaining in my satchel. When you are rested and revived

a little, you shall go to your room. Is there a nice fire in papa's room, Esther?"

Esther went to see; she knew the fire was all right, but she wanted to get away, for there was a tightness at her heart, and a choking sensation in her throat, and a mist before her eyes, she would not for worlds have allowed any one to perceive. Looking back as she crossed the threshold, she saw the father's hand lovingly wandering among the golden curls; a sweet, sad smile was on his pallid, handsome face, and Esther heard him softly say, "My love, my child, my little Flossy!" She ran away that she might see and hear no more.

Not that she was envious, poor Esther! nothing in all her pale, grey life had ever interested her as this new arrival had. Lodgers by the dozen had come and gone, and she had waited on them, and cared nothing about them personally; and, for reasons not at all inscrutable, people seldom stayed at Mrs. Hellicar's as long as they had purposed, and they never came twice. Only Mr. Macgregor, the Scotchman, who lived in the little back parlour, like the cobbler in his stall, was a permanency, and to impose upon him would have been a case of "diamond cut diamond."

But Esther felt suddenly that nobody in all the world loved her, and that she loved nobody; and the very thought of what it must be to have a father—a good, noble father to pet and to care for, and to feel his hands lovingly smoothing her own hair, that as long as she remembered fond fingers had never touched, gave her what the French call an *épanchement du cœur*, and what she herself styled "a queer, stupid, choking sensation."

Later in the evening, after Mr. Guise had gone to bed, Miss Guise told Esther that they had brought with them many things, besides articles of clothing, and toilet requisites. "You see," she said, "we shall stay here, if we do not inconvenience you, for nine months, or perhaps a year. It seems very quiet for London, and Mr. York says it is quite near to Gray's Inn and Chancery Lane. So I must make *these rooms look as home-like as I can*, for papa's sake. He *is so ailing and nervous* sometimes, poor dear. He has a

horrible cruel pain called neuralgia every now and then. I have brought my work-table, and there is a book-case coming, and lots of books. Also, I have my own morning-room chimney ornaments with me; and, if you don't mind, I should like them instead of those vases. And I must see about a piano; it could stand there nicely. I wonder if they hire music-stools and canterburies, as well as pianos. There is an immense deal to unpack, and I didn't bring my maid with me. Papa said I could get one in town; but you will help me till I get somebody, will you not, Esther? I must have the rooms comfortable, and nice, and pretty for papa, you know."

Being naturally reserved, Esther merely said she would help Miss Guise willingly; but in her heart she felt as if some great and unexpected pleasure were in store for her.

CHAPTER IV.

"BENEDICTUS QUI VENIT IN NOMINE DOMINI."

WHEN Esther carried the kettle in next morning, Miss Guise was already busy at the breakfast table, making various little alterations, which Esther's quick eye immediately detected. Esther had been washing the children, and taking up her aunt's breakfast, and getting Mr. Hellicar and Dick off to the City; so Biddy had been unavoidably entrusted with the morning arrangements upstairs, and it must be confessed that this young woman's conceptions of what is necessary to a well-set table were shadowy in the extreme.

"Good morning, Miss Kendall," said Florence, looking up from the cups and saucers. "How bright it is after yesterday's rain! Really the Square looks quite nice; I think it must be almost pretty in the summer; that is, for the town, you know. And papa has slept so well, and is quite ready for his breakfast. What can you give us, Miss Kendall?"

"Tea or coffee, and bread and butter and toast. I am afraid *the eggs are not to be trusted.*"

"I am sorry for that, for eggs are so good for papa. Cannot one get good eggs in London?"

"Yes, if you send to the right place for them; but I do not know of any place about here, at least at this time of the year. But please call me Esther."

"Then, Esther, could papa have a broiled kidney?"

"I'll send Biddy round to the butcher's; our butcher lives in Dean Street; but it is not always easy to get kidneys unless they are ordered, and our butcher is not obliging."

"And even if you get them, they will have to be cooked, and that will take time, and papa must not wait so long. I think I will take him a cup of tea, and some very nice hot toast. Could you make me some very nice indeed? You must not think I am fussy, but papa is such an invalid. I will order things in to-day, and then he can have what he likes."

Esther went down to make the toast, and did her best, but succeeded indifferently; for, during her absence, Biddy, with that unlucky want of prescience common to servants of her class, had just made up the fire, and instead of the nice bed of glowing coals she had left, Esther found only a frontispiece of smoke and blackness. Nice toast or broiled kidneys seemed equally out of the question. It was late after all before Mr. Guise had his breakfast, and his daughter resolved upon certain measures to be taken for the future. It was the first time in her life she had ever been left to her own resources; but she was not daunted, and she determined that, with Esther for an ally, she would be equal to the situation.

But how pretty and how bright she looked, even when she was troubled about the blackened toast and the dingy tray-cloth she carried into her father's room! She wore a simple morning dress of a delicate grey colour, the daintiest little cuffs and collar, and her golden curls were gathered up with fluttering violet ribbons. Her dress was plain as plain could be; the grey alpaca, though very good of its kind, was *anything but costly*; yet she looked so neat, so fresh, so *altogether charming*, that Esther forgot her shame at present-

ing toast that she knew was really unpresentable, if not decidedly uneatable. She, too, made certain resolves, though she knew there would be a host of adverse circumstances to oppose her in the lower regions. How she hated her dirty, shabby frock, and her untidy hair, as she glanced at Miss Guise's graceful folds of silvery grey, and noted the smooth, shining order of her luxuriant curls! Why, it would not take long to do up hair like that; but then where were the violet ribbons to come from? Under the present *régime* they seemed nearly as unattainable as a *bandeau* of diamonds; and it never occurred to poor, unsophisticated Esther that the lovely shade of *mauve* or violet that went so well with a delicate complexion and golden tresses would not be at all becoming with coal-black hair and a very swarthy skin. It did not matter. Unless somebody gave her ribbons, she was not likely to get them of any colour. But she rebelled against the tattered coburg with all her heart, and was painfully conscious of its clumsy darns, and its natural fringe all round the bottom. And if she had only brushed her hair half a minute longer, when she got up and dressed by candle-light, Tom screaming, and Fanny fretting, and Lizzie peevishly chiding all the while! And yet yesterday morning she had felt comparatively content, so far, at least, as her toilet was concerned.

About noon Miss Guise began to be very busy, and she called upon Esther for the fulfilment of her promise of help; and Esther went to her assistance readily enough, risking the possibility of blame for neglecting other duties. Several boxes and cases were in process of unpacking, and Mrs. Hellicar's drawing-room was being gradually and very pleasingly transmogrified. It is a question whether that excellent lady would have known her own "apartment" if she had been brought into it without any word of preparation. The gaudy vases, and the pink and gilt paper spill-cups, and the shepherdess with a green crook and a yellow hat, followed by a lamb with a wreath of brick-red roses round its neck—kissing a sailor lad in blue under a tree that seemed to produce pink and white poppies, were cleared away from the chimney-piece, and a beautiful statuette, a

pair of classic vases, and two antique candlesticks, in which were rosy wax candles, figured in their stead. Lizzie's anti-macassars were neatly folded up, and some of Miss Guise's own work adorned the easy chairs and the sofa, which latter was accommodated with several downy, silken cushions. Florence's work-table figured in the centre window; the vulgar, inharmonious table-cover was laid aside, and the large table was simply draped in rich claret-coloured cloth, edged with palest gold embroidery. Pretty and costly things figured everywhere, and nearly all were useful as well as ornamental. Esther gazed with reverence on the silver ink-stand and the rosewood desks and netting-boxes, and the exquisite Dresden card-basket, and the elaborate envelope-coffer, and the mother-of-pearl tea-caddy, and upon twenty other articles of *virtu*, including a little old china, which she could not help thinking rather out of place among so many handsome and expensive articles. Her astonishment increased as Miss Guise, after carefully arranging it on a side table, said—

“Will you please tell your servant not to touch this china? I am afraid of general servants in matters of this kind. I would prefer to dust it myself; I shall keep one of papa's old Indian silk handkerchiefs on purpose. I should never forgive myself if it were broken, for I was advised not to bring it; but I thought it would make a strange room look more home-like, and papa remembers it ever since he was born.”

“Is it worth much?” asked Esther, bluntly.

“Worth a great deal: worth more than I can guess; this real dragon-china is always valuable—look how transparent it is. But this is a peculiar treasure, because it was not bought—that is, I mean it has been in the family for generations. Charles II.'s queen, Katherine of Braganza, gave it to one of my ancestresses; there is a great deal more of it at Guise Court.”

“Is that where you live?”

“Yes; I was born there, and so was papa, and papa's *papa also*. Guise Court is a dear old place! Do you like *the country, Esther?*”

"I don't know: I never saw it. I fancy I should not like it, though."

"Do you mean you have lived in Queen Square all your life? Have you really never been out of London?"

"I have been to Hampstead Heath; I went to 'Jack Straw's Castle' and the 'Spaniards' last summer twelve-months, if you call that going out of London; and two years ago I went somewhere in a boat down the river. Oh, yes, I did see the country once, and I did like it, I remember. I was a very little girl, and somebody took me to Epping Forest; but I cannot recollect much about it. I suppose you have seen a great many places, Miss Guise?"

"I have not travelled much in England, but I have been abroad, in France, and Germany, and Switzerland; and I have been in Paris for nearly a year at one time. My cousin Cecil was at school there, so I went too; but papa could not spare me, and he sent for me back, to madame's extreme regret and indignation. Cecil stayed two years longer, and she is very accomplished."

"Are you not accomplished?"

"Not very. I play and sing, of course, but not brilliantly, only just enough to amuse papa and please Oswald. I sketch pretty well in water-colours, I believe; I am fond of drawing: in another case, that we have not time to unpack to-day, I have some sketches framed; I shall hang them up instead of those—those oil-paintings, if you do not object. Of course I speak French and German, that is just a matter of course."

"Miss Guise, I know nothing, absolutely nothing. I would not mind so much about being accomplished, for I suppose accomplishments are not suited to my station in life. Aunt Myra says they are not, but I should like, oh! so much, to know common things, to be able to speak properly."

"You do speak properly; your English is very tolerable. Your voice might be a little softer, perhaps, but I should never have found out from your way of speaking that you were uneducated."

"I am glad of that, but I speak from ear; I could not

tell you why it is wrong to say '*was you ?*' as some people in this house do. I know it sounds badly, that is all."

"And I know little more," replied Florence, laughing; "they never could beat grammar into me; my governesses tormented me and themselves in vain, and my last dear governess, Miss Lake, had the good sense to give it up. She confessed that my ear was a fine one, and that from the circumstances of my birth and the associations of my childhood, I spoke properly, and that was sufficient, she declared, though it would not have sufficed for her, who was required to teach composition and the construction of languages. And I suppose if I wanted to write a book I should quickly be involved in difficulties; but of course I never shall write a book, for I am not clever, only just an ordinary woman. So you see you need not trouble yourself about ignorance of the *rules* of grammar: I dare say you know a verb from a noun, and that is as much as I do."

"Indeed I do not; at least, I could not be certain. But I only mentioned my ignorance of grammar as a specimen of my general deficiencies. I know no geography, no history, no anything. I have read no books; I have heard no clever people talk. I can read, and write a sort of scrawl, and add up pounds, shillings, and pence—if there are not too many of them—and I can sing hymns in church. Of course I can cook dinners, and wash babies, and black grates, and sweep out rooms; but unless I am to be a servant I do not see what good that will do me. Aunt Myra says she likes to see girls '*domesticated*.' I hate the word, for as she uses it it means *drudgery*!"

Florence looked puzzled; she was being initiated in a new phase of life. Esther spoke very much like a young lady, and it had never occurred to her to treat her as an inferior; yet she was evidently quite uneducated, and did all kinds of rough housework habitually; and then—she was so terribly untidy! Miss Guise was perplexed but interested in this awkward, gawky girl, who discoursed so vehemently, and seemed to take a sort of pleasure in heaping scorn upon *herself*, and had a certain air of breeding about her, in spite of her dilapidated raiment and neglected coiffure.

“I always thought I was domesticated,” she replied presently, “yet I never cleaned a room or helped to cook a meal in my life ; but I like to see home bright and nice and pretty, and I am very anxious that papa should have everything he can possibly want or wish for. Still, Esther, I fancy I could, if it were needful, if it became a *duty*, you know, do the sort of things you mention. I should not like it, of course ; but then if a thing ought to be done, and must be done, the mere liking is of little consequence. We cannot always please ourselves ; and yet—I don’t know—in striving to please others one does somehow generally get to pleasing one’s self.”

In which sentiment Esther could not concur ; she had been pleasing others all her life, she told herself, without the accruing of the slightest satisfaction to herself. Miss Guise’s experiences and her own must be widely different. It did not strike Esther that her pleasing of others principally consisted in giving up her own way because she could not help it, or for the sake of peace ; for if her will ever did clash with the will of any other member of the family, and she persisted in struggling for what she deemed her rights, there invariably resulted what Dick called “a regular scrimmage,” in which his cousin always got the worst of it, and sooner or later had to succumb to “the powers that be.”

This was not quite the “striving to please others” to which Florence referred ; but Esther, though she had, happily for her, a good fund of sterling principle in her nature, and an innate aversion to anything like chicanery, deceit, or pretence, was not gifted with the finer moral perceptions ; and as to religion, she was almost as much in the dark as if she had been brought up among the wild Indians who reverence the “Great Spirit.” She went to church whenever she could ; it was a change, a sort of entertainment, and the words of the Liturgy had a kind of fascination for her. Moreover, she liked the music and the singing ; and while she sat in the church, and listened to the preacher’s voice, and dreamed day-dreams all her own, there was at least a cessation of sordid toil, her aunt could not scold and lecture her, the children could not worry her,

Lizzie could not be saucy, nor Dick obtrusive and impudent. Altogether the church was a quiet, pleasant refuge, and Sundays, on the whole, were to be preferred to week-days ; for, if ever there came a pale, faint streak of gold into the grey, cloudy firmament of her young life, it was on Sunday.

"I will lend you some books," said Florence kindly ; "you must have some time to yourself."

Esther shook her head : "Not a minute, unless I take it by stealth. They will not let me read. My aunt says reading makes me uppish, and does me harm. I do get a book sometimes, and read it by snatches ; but it always brings me into trouble, for Lizzie is sure to find out all about it. She has eyes all over her head, I do believe, and ears that hear everything, and she loves making mischief ; and even little Fanny knows that she can tell tales of me. Tom, who is three years old, accounts for every kind of disaster by saying, 'Naughty Esther did it !' I wonder if there is a scapegoat in every house."

It pained Florence's heart to listen to her, and to see her ; for there was a world of suppressed indignation and bitterness in her tones, and there was an expression of unwomanly defiance and hate in her lustrous dark grey eyes. She had suffered much, Florence was sure ; but then, with that passionate, vehement nature, and that ill-taught, undisciplined mind, might she not, in the first place, have created a strong prejudice against herself ? Might she not thus have formed impressions that were indelible with certain selfish, narrow-minded characters ? "And yet," said Florence afterwards in talking to her papa—"yet I feel as if I must like her, and be her friend. She is no ordinary person. I thought at first how very plain she was, not even commonly good-looking ; but while she talked to me this morning, she flashed up all of a sudden into a strange, grand sort of beauty, such as I have seen in pictures. I found out that she had magnificent eyes, and splendid eyelashes ; and you should have seen the crimson on her cheeks when she became excited. Oh, I know ! she was like the Cumæan *Sibyl* we saw when we were abroad."

"*My dear, she looks very untidy,*" said Mr. Guise gravely.

"So she does, papa, horribly untidy and unkempt. She goes about in 'unwomanly rags.' I longed to get needle and thread, and turn up a new hem round that miserable dress-skirt of hers ; but I fancy she has lost heart : she has been oppressed, and she has left off caring about herself."

"What makes you think she is oppressed, my Flossy ?"

"They will not let her read or learn ; and see how she works, like any common servant. Indeed, none of our servants at home would consent to perform such miscellaneous duties."

"My dear, you ought to hear both sides before you decide how to behave to this young girl. If you can do her any good, I need not say to you, do it to the utmost of your power, and to the whole extent of your opportunities ; but I do not quite like her beginning to complain at the very outset. Young people are sometimes at feud with their friends, and it is purely their own fault. This Esther Kendall may, by her own wayward conduct, have estranged and alienated relations who, on their side, perhaps, did not make sufficient allowance for a strong, vehement nature, and a hasty temper."

"She did not exactly set herself to complain ; she began by deploring her ignorance, and all the rest followed. I think she is very honest. I do not think she would defend herself at the expense of others ; but I am sure she has a strong sense of injustice. There is something so brave and *true* in her face, papa, when you come to look into it, especially when it lights up. Yes, I must be her friend, and you must show me how, papa darling. I must be wise, or I shall not really befriend her. I can quite see that a little imprudence on my part may complicate her position and increase her difficulties. See what a cautious, non-impulsive young woman I am becoming, papa !"

"You are my own thoughtful, considerate Florence. *Oh, dear !*"

"What is it, darling ?—that cruel pain ?"

Mr. Guise drew a long breath, and became very pale. He had small, beautiful *hands*, and the white fingers began *nervously interlacing* each other, and a tremor passed over

his frame. His daughter knew the signs, and she hastened to administer the stimulant which sometimes prevented a regular attack, or at least adjourned it. The agony was over in less than a minute, but it left him pallid and exhausted ; and Florence's heart sank—oh, with such a sinking, as she thought of what might be some day, of what probably would be, if this terrible enemy pain were not conquered and driven from the field. This was a mere spasm ; but there had been days and nights of bitter suffering, of the extremity of mortal anguish—such anguish that Florence could have let him go without a tear. Nay, at the moment, she would have given thanks that God had taken His servant to his rest, that he had reached at last the land where there “is no more pain.”

Oh, the great mystery of pain ! Whence comes it—why is it permitted ? Ah ! we cannot tell ; only we know that it comes not to us unsent. One who has now passed away from earth, one who knew what it was to suffer, and meekly to endure, beautifully wrote :—

“ Who is the angel that cometh ?
Pain !
Let us arise and go forth to greet him.
Not in vain
Is the summons come for us to meet him.
He will stay
And darken our sun ;
He will stay—
A desolate night, a weary day.
Since in that shadow our work is done,
And in that shadow our crowns are won,
Let us say, while his bitter chalice
Slowly into our hearts is poured,
‘ Blessed is he that cometh
In the name of the Lord ! ’ ”

Even so, pain, thou art a shrouded angel if they to whom thou comest meet thee as God's messenger ! We may writhe under thy stern grasp, and we may shudder as we hear thy footsteps coming from afar through the darkness, for we are *only frail mortal clay* ; but the good Lord knows our feeble *frame*, *He remembers that we are dust* ; and, like as a father

pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him. And, fearing Him, let us have no other fear, let us be calm and patient when God's angels visit us—His Angel of Pain, His Angel of Grief, or His loving, merciful Angel of Death ; for His angels are His ministering servants, and "blessed is he who cometh in the name of the Lord."

CHAPTER V.

MRS. HELLICAR OFFERS HER SERVICES.

THE Guises had been nearly a fortnight in Queen Square before they were visited by the mistress of the house. That Mr. Hellicar should wait upon them was not to be thought of, for on nearly every occasion he showed himself to be the reverse of the right man in the right place ; and he had such a habit of making infelicitous observations, and of blurting out the most unnecessary truths, that it was judged to be only safe policy to keep him in the background. If he had not been continually sued for the Queen's taxes, and bullied for the rent by the landlord's agent, and served with summonses on the part of infuriate tradesmen, no one could possibly have believed him to be the master of the house and the head of the Hellicar family.

So Mr. Hellicar never once thought of presenting himself to his new inmates ; but he said to Esther, a day or two after their arrival, "Now, you mind and see that their weekly bills are properly made out ; it's very clear that they have got lots of money, and don't mind spending it freely, and why shouldn't we come in for our share ? We may as well make a good thing by them as not ; somebody else will, if we don't. So just see to it, there's a good girl ; and if I find them paying up to my mind—*up to my mind, you understand !*—I'll coax your aunt into buying you a new winter frock out of some of the money. You do want one ;" and he eyed the tattered coburg with something like shame in his soul and *compunction* in his heart. For he had a little *bit of conscience left*, and there were moments when he

bitterly reproached himself on account of his wife's brother's child.

But Esther looked him in the face, and her lips curled with contempt, and her grey eyes were lustrous with anger and scorn, and she answered, "I do understand, and I promise you their bills shall be properly made out; nothing shall be omitted; they shall have the best articles, and they shall pay the best price for them, for they can afford it. But they shall be honestly dealt with, and I shall take care that they do not *pay up to your mind*! I have heard that phrase before, uncle, and I know what it means. And I will not have a new dress out of the pickings and stealings of the Hellicars. I do want a dress; it is useless trying to mend this ragged thing, it falls to pieces under the needle. And I think I earned one long ago; but never mind; the disgrace of my shabbiness is not my own. But I would rather go like a cinder-wench than wear silks and velvets that were not come by honestly."

When Esther spoke in that way, Richard Hellicar was always cowed, and sometimes he began to cry, and maunder about being a poor broken-down old fellow, whom nobody respected, and whose own flesh and blood despised him. Which, indeed, was terribly near the truth, for no one who had dealings with Mr. Hellicar ever respected him, and as for his children, they had not for him the smallest reverence or esteem. "As weak as water, like the governor," Dick used to say, when any eminently unsuccessful person was named; and "only pa" was Miss Lizzie's style of allusion to her paternal parent. Filial piety was a virtue utterly unknown among the Hellicars.

But for once Mr. Hellicar was neither weak nor lachrymose, and he swore soundly at his niece, and informed her that she was a fool, and that it would be a great deal better for her if she would make herself agreeable in the house. And he went off in a terrible huff to the office in the City, where he carried on his redoubtable commission agency. "A gentlemanly calling," Mr. Hellicar would say, referring to *his commission* business, "but sadly unprofitable — come *down to nothing* in these days!" But then, you see, he

undertook such very peculiar commissions, and his transactions were nearly always *sub rosa*, and his agencies were generally for seedy-looking individuals, who wore rough coats and flashy waistcoats, who smoked short pipes of villainous tobacco, who kept their large red hands in their trousers-pockets, and were slangy and horsy in their common talk. And there is an old saying that "birds of a feather flock together," and I am afraid it could have been applied to the case of Mr. Hellicar without any violation of Christian charity; and that, perhaps, may account for the non-success of his commission agency!

Once or twice Dick met Miss Guise on the stairs, and her presence rather subdued him, for he felt unequal to whistling "Pop goes the weasel" till she was fairly out of hearing; neither had he the courage to wink his left eye as he passed, his customary salutation to pretty girls. Miss Guise on her part thought him a very vulgar, unpleasant-looking young man, and she was sorry for Esther, who was unavoidably thrown into his society whenever he was in the house; though Esther had confessed that, as a rule, Dick stood by her whenever there was any serious dispute; and if she were scolded and tormented by her aunt Myra, he generally gave his stepmother a piece of his mind, that reduced her to at least a temporary silence.

But why did not Mrs. Hellicar pay her usual introductory visit to her new lodgers till a full fortnight had elapsed? It was the sad state of her health, she declared, that prevented her from making the acquaintance of Mr. and Miss Guise any sooner; but the real cause of prevention was the state of her wardrobe. Mrs. Hellicar had not a presentable silk dress, and she deemed it unworthy of the late Myra Clarkson to pay the visit of ceremony in a robe of any other material. A brand new silk dress, that crackled and rustled, and swept about imposingly, was Mrs. Hellicar's idea of perfect gentility. *Satins* and aristocracy went together!

So Mrs. Hellicar, by dint of a little contrivance, found the necessary coin of the realm, and she went into Bishopsgate Street, where there happened to be a "selling off," an "*alarming sacrifice*," a "*giving away* of property," for the

very smallest consideration ! The only wonder was that these philanthropic and generous-minded tradesmen did not actually offer a premium to any one who would kindly relieve them of a certain portion of the "bankrupt stock" which somehow came to encumber their premises. However, they sold everything far below cost price, and it was rumoured that you might purchase a handsome Lyons velvet mantle, trimmed with real sables, for £2 19s. 11d., and a set of valuable ermine for fourteen shillings and odd pence ! No wonder that Mrs. Hellicar, scenting the prey from afar, was ready to travel from Queen Square to Bishopsgate Street Without, in search of goodly raiment on such advantageous terms. If the dresses were really being sold according to the advertisement, she thought she might squeeze out the price of an ermine muff and boa for Lizzie. "Ermine was so remarkably *genteel* !" as she told a friend in the omnibus, as they rattled down Cheapside and the Poultry, on their way to the Bank.

I am sorry to say that the event fell far short of the expectations of Mrs. Hellicar ; the dresses were *not* being given away or anything like it. Indeed, when I come to consider the large admixture of cotton, and the amount of gummy stuff used to give them a substance and a gloss, I should say they were dear at any price, and would scarcely pay for making up if you had them at a gift. But if women will be so foolish as to give credence to the incredible, if they will persist in cheap finery, and prefer meretricious bargains to ordinary purchases at respectable shops, they deserve to be disappointed, and to find out that they have thrown away their money after all.

I am not going to describe the shopping of a vain, silly, under-bred woman in a low-class shop. Suffice it to say that, after a goodly number of the vaunted "10,000 silk dresses, wide width, full length," had been shown to her by an audacious young man, who lied so well that he must "have been to the manner born," she concluded a bargain just as the gas was lit,—a magnificent blue and green and *white and black* and yellow plaid, which she determined to *have made up* with imitation garnet buttons and appropriate

fringes. A lovely Honiton lace collar and pair of cuffs were *all but* thrown in, and a French cambric embroidered handkerchief was offered so dirt cheap that it could not be refused ; and Mrs. Hellicar returned home pretty well satisfied, though rather uncertain about the collar and cuffs being of the genuine material.

In due time the plaid silk was made up in the very newest fashion, and Mrs. Hellicar, after trying it on, decided that it was a perfect fit, and that the red glass buttons could not have looked better if they had been real garnets, such as that vulgar woman Mrs. Shanks, the well-to-do butcher's wife, presumed to wear. Not that Mrs. Hellicar would have cared what such a person as Mrs. Shanks wore or did not wear, only she sat in the pew before her in church ; and it seriously interfered with her devotions when gowns, bonnets, and mantles so much more costly than her own were flourished under her eyes on the comely person of a matron who knew nothing about the elegancies and refinements to which she as Myra Clarkson had been accustomed in her paradisiacal maiden days.

The evening came, when she sent up her compliments to Mr. and Miss Guise, and would be happy to make their acquaintance if they were not otherwise engaged. Mr. and Miss Guise, not being otherwise engaged, were quite ready to see Mrs. Hellicar, and in five minutes after this message had travelled from the drawing-room to the front kitchen a prodigious rustling was heard on the landing, a tapping very like the last efforts of an expiring woodpecker was heard at the door, and enter the lady of the house. If Miss Guise had not been a veritable gentlewoman she would certainly have demonstrated some of the surprise she experienced. She had twice caught sight of a slip-shod, slovenly-wrapped, curl-papered, woful-looking woman, hastily fleeing from sight, and diving down into the darkness of the lower stairs ; and she had learned that this was Mrs. Hellicar, making a surreptitious progress from the garret to the basement story, therefore she was quite unprepared for the magnificence suddenly presented to her view. Florence Guise had never *seen so much actual finery* in all her life.

Of course the new silk dress in all its spick and span and bran newness was complacently displayed ; but my fair readers know that in a case of unmitigated grandeur, the dress, the actual gown itself, is only the appropriate foundation on which is built up the whole splendid edifice of the complete *toilette*. Of course the gown is indispensable, but it is only one of the countless glories of the perfect costume. In this case it was supplemented to the full with ribbons, and lace, and jewellery. The miraculous "Honiton set" was there, of course ; a pearl buckle confined the crimson waistband, a very suspicious-looking gold chain dangled from the large pendant yellow topaz brooch, and held suspended a handful of cheap rubbish called "*charms*," among which showed conspicuously a miniature gridiron, a coffin, a slipper, a little jug, and Faith, Hope, and Charity, symbolised by a little chipped cross and heart and a mutilated anchor. It was evident that Mrs. Hellicar had a passion for bracelets, and it was also pretty clear that her jeweller lived in the Lowther Arcade ; as for rings, they actually stiffened her fingers, and a superb gilt and green-glass *solitaire* clasped a parti-coloured velvet round her throat. Her head-dress baffles description ; it was a choice compound of lace, and ribbon, and artificial flowers, and marabout feathers, and mock pearls, and it gave her sadly the appearance of a crazy-stage-queen on the boards of an itinerant theatre.

"Miss Guise, I presume?" said Mrs. Hellicar, smiling sweetly, and making a dancing-school curtsy. Miss Guise bowed and smiled too, and Mr. Guise, as in duty bound, rose and placed her a chair. Mrs. Hellicar sank into it, still smiling faintly, and flourishing a scent bottle and the new bargain of an embroidered pocket-handkerchief in what she considered to be very imposing style. She was surprised to find now "meanly" Miss Guise was dressed—only a plain French merino, simple collar and cuffs, and ribbon in her hair, and no jewellery at all, save a little pearl brooch, and one splendid ring on her engaged finger.

"You must have deemed me excessively remiss," began Mrs. Hellicar, "in not calling upon you sooner"—she spoke *as if she came from the next street to pay a friendly visit—*

“but indeed I suffer so much ; my health is so extremely delicate—sometimes for days and days I am unequal to the slightest exertion. I am a poor creature, Mr. Guise, and nobody but myself knows what I have gone through. My frame has been shattered, my constitution impaired, my nerves torn. People used to say that I was pretty in my young days ; but, oh dear me ! I am only the wreck of what I was. I have seen trouble, Mr. Guise. I have known reverses—oh ! such reverses.”

Mr. Guise expressed his sorrow for Mrs. Hellicar's reverses, and she went on.

“Yes ; I need not tell you that I have seen better days, that I was not brought up to let lodgings, nor indeed was I connected with business in any way. Ah, Miss Guise, you young ladies little know what you bring upon yourselves when you are so anxious to get married. You little think what it is to have a family, and to be obliged to bring them up anyhow ; to be surrounded by your helpless children, and your spiritless husband sitting opposite to you staring at the fire, and a babe at your breast, crying day and night, and you that weak you can scarcely crawl or stand. It's all very hard to bear, Miss Guise, though you may not believe it.”

Florence quite believed that such a wretched combination of circumstances must be very hard indeed ; but she wondered that Mrs. Hellicar should think it necessary to say all this. She hastened to reply that she hoped she was feeling a little better now.

“Oh, yes, a little, Miss Guise. I am not quite as nervous as usual this evening, and society is good for me. My medical man, indeed two medical men, if not three, have said to me, ‘My dear Mrs. Hellicar, you are extremely weak—weakness is your malady ; you have no muscle, you are all *nerve*. You need rest, and change of air, and a very generous diet, and, above all things, *society*—you should go more into society, indeed you should !’ But though once it was believed that I was the star of the brilliant system in which I revolved, that I adorned the circle in which I moved, I feel now that long seclusion and suffering, and the

cares and trials of maternity, to say nothing of most unhappy conjugal experiences, have robbed me of such poor charms as I once possessed, and so crushed my spirit and weakened my frame that I am no longer fitted to take my proper position in the fashionable world. Still, the luxury of refined companionship is appreciated by me ; still I enjoy the feast of reason and the flow of—what is it ? my poor memory has so given way of late. Don't you think, Mr. Guise, that weakness of the frame impairs the memory ?”

Mrs. Hellicar was always talking about her “frame,” or some particular much-to-be-condoled-with portion of her frame ; till Dick would sometimes mutter, “Confound your frame ; I wish to goodness you would come unframed !”

Mr. Guise signified his assent to Mr. Hellicar's proposition ; and that lady resumed : “Yes, I can taste the sweets of intellectual society, though I shrink now from the gay throngs and the halls of dazzling light of former years ; and if ever you feel dull, my dear Miss Guise, you have only to say so to Esther, who, I trust, waits upon you properly ; she is a thoughtless girl—a very thoughtless girl indeed, with a violent temper and *no mind* ; and she gives me a great deal of uneasiness. What was I saying ? You have only to desire Esther to speak to me, and I will come up and bring my netting, or my crochet-work, any evening. Or I should be so pleased to be of service to you in another way. At your age you ought to be going out and seeing the world. I shall be delighted to walk or drive with you at any time. I could *chaperone* you to the Polytechnic now, or take you over Westminster Abbey, or the Tower—those historical places are very improving to young people, Mr. Guise—or, best of all, I could make interest for you on a drawing-room day, to see the ladies going to Court to kiss Her Majesty's hand. It's an uncommonly fine sight, Miss Guise, and tends to make one loyal and devoted to our Queen. I always tell my children it is next to faith in God.”

“You are very kind,” returned Mr. Guise, a little stiffly ; “but my daughter has visited the places you mention. She *is no stranger to London*, though not familiar with this part *of it* ; and she was presented last year by her aunt, Lady

Torrisdale. A pageant in which she once bore a part will scarcely interest her as a mere bystander."

"I am sure I beg your pardon," returned Mrs. Hellicar, feeling very small indeed, but at the same time resolving to flourish the Guises under the very nose of Mrs. Shanks, and Mrs. Peppercorn, the grocer's wife, and the stylish Mrs. Coffnomore, the druggist's lady, round the corner in Southampton Row. Mrs. Hellicar had a habit of speaking of her lodgers, especially if they were people to be acknowledged, as "friends who were *staying* with her." It was a question whether she imposed upon her acquaintances as thoroughly as she flattered herself she did.

Mrs. Hellicar stayed some time longer, and graciously accepted a glass of wine, which she sipped genteelly ; and she discoursed on many subjects, professing herself a lover of music, but rather out of practice, an adorer of the fine arts generally, and an anonymous poetess. A second glass of Mr. Guise's excellent old port made her confidential, and she deplored her unsuitable marriage, and remarked that but for the consolations of religion she should have sunk years ago into an early grave. She gave Florence much prudent advice about young men, and again reverting to Esther, shook her head, saying that Mr. Hellicar would keep her, though she really had no claim in the world on him—a niece of his first wife, that was all. And she owed everything to them ; they had fed her and clothed her for nine years, and all she gave in return was base ingratitude. She, Mrs. Hellicar, washed her hands of Esther ; she had quite given her up, after having solemnly warned her of a day of wrath to come.

Florence's throat ached with the words she was swallowing down ; her papa had given her a glance which she understood, and she felt herself that any injudicious interference now might render null and void any future attempts to be of use to Esther. But when the dress had rustled downstairs again, Mr. Guise said, "That is an insufferable woman. If we had seen her we should never have taken these rooms. *Do you think that dress of hers was made of painted paper, Flossy dear ?*"

CHAPTER VI.

OSWALD AND CECIL.

CECIL UFFADYNE folded up her work when it grew too dark to see any longer. Then she stirred the fire into a cheerful blaze, and, sitting down in a low chair by the hearth, began to tear old letters and circulars into little pieces ; for she was a young lady of remarkable energy and activity, much addicted to using up all her spare moments of time, and counting up the exact gain thereof at the end of every month with remarkable precision, and to her own infinite satisfaction. "Gather up the fragments" was the grand spring on which depended all the machinery of Cecil's busy life.

While the fitful shadows are dancing on the walls and ceiling, let us look at the drawing-room of which she is the mistress. "All wise women are proud of their drawing-rooms," says the experienced Anthony Trollope. I go further still. I think that, as a rule, a drawing-room is a pretty clear exposition of the character, and mind, and style of the woman who reigns over it. Show me a drawing-room, and I will tell you what kind of woman is its mistress. There are certain signs by which I shall know whether she be an idle slattern, or only a passive, languid, dilatory, amiable, half-lay figure, leaving her husband to order the dinner, and her servants to their own sweet will ; whether she be a vixenish, arbitrary matron, who, in her zeal to prove that cleanliness is next to godliness, brings godliness in disrepute through her temper. I am afraid all VERY clean women, given to incessant scrubbing and polishing, are more or less vixens ; acrimony of disposition and distressing cleanliness seem naturally to go together. Or whether the lady be only a very respectable, painstaking *Martha*, not a worry or a fidget, but really a very useful, energetic, housewifely sort of person, who looks well to the ways of her household, and eats not the bread of idleness. *There is a certain something* which will tell me whether *Madame* be a woman of taste and gentle breeding, or

whether she be a consequential dame, who has just achieved a certain position, and thinks that plenty of money will surely furnish a house to "perfectest perfection." I shall know whether she loves reading, whether she spoils her children, whether she keeps her husband in subjection, or *vice versa*.

I shall know a hundred things, and so will you if you only make use of your eyes and your perceptive qualities; and some drawing-rooms will seem to you like a plot of poppies, pœonies, and tulips, all beautiful in themselves, but blending inharmoniously as a whole; and others like a garden of sweet roses; and others, again, like lilies, and roses, and green foliage interwoven.

But there are some rooms that always remind me of a bed of mignonette; I can scarcely tell you why. There is about them such an air of cheerfulness, such thorough comfort, such brightness, such sweetness, such neatness without formality. You think how pleasantly life must go in such a room; the books look as if they asked you to read them; the work-baskets make your finger-ends tingle to be busy; the sofas and lounging-chairs woo you to repose; the piano seems to keep up a pleasant tune, that only your spiritual ears can hear; there is no one conspicuous ornament, yet real gems are all around you, and you are sure the mistress of that house is kind, and good, and thoughtful, cultured in her tastes, "a spirit, yet a woman too"—aye, and a finished gentlewoman.

So much for drawing-rooms in general; now for Cecil Uffadyne's. It was a very charming room, a cosy bower of comfort and delights; it abounded in books, it gloried in a magnificent pianoforte; its draperies were the prettiest that can be imagined, its ornamentation was absolutely faultless. The windows were at right angles; one looking over a sloping lawn, a plantation of evergreens, and the high road, and the far away Mendip Hills; the other opening on the loveliest of gardens, beyond which lay a stretch of rich meadow land; then the village of Chilcombe, with its grey church tower nestling among some of the finest trees that the west country has to boast of; then more meadow land, then a

flowery vale of legendary beauty, and last of all, far off, the sea line, sometimes so grey that it mingled with the sky itself; sometimes so bright that it sparkled like ten thousand diamonds, or shone like a setting of red gold against the sapphire of the calm horizon.

This evening, however, you saw nothing of the view without; all your interest was concentrated in that pleasant drawing-room, and specially in the bending figure on the hearth, rapidly tearing up old envelopes and useless letters and putting the pieces into a large bag that stood beside her. Cecil Uffadyne was a fine-looking young woman—tall, slim, quick in her movements, rapid in her speech, which yet was remarkably distinct; passionate in her likings and dislikings, and rather extreme in her views—and she had her views on nearly every subject under the sun, and held to them with tolerable, or, as some censorious people said, *intolerable* pertinacity. You could not call her handsome, yet she had a very pleasant face of her own; it was so full of life—active, vigorous, healthy, girlish life; and there was so much common-sense in her olive-skinned but sunny countenance, so much frankness and truth in her rather steady gaze, so much freshness in her every tone and expression, that you took to her, in spite of yourself, at the first interview, and pronounced her to be very clever and extremely charming.

It grew darker and darker, till at last a little trill of silvery chimes on the chimney-piece told the third quarter after five. Then Cecil sprang up, first shaking her apron into the fender, that the housemaid might have no trouble with the little bits in the morning; then she stirred the fire, and rang the bell, and ordered the lamps to be brought, and finally ran upstairs to her own room, where she made a very speedy but effective toilet, and came back again to the drawing-room in rather less time than it would have taken some young ladies to think about it.

She had not long been seated with a book in her hand, when she heard a step on the gravel walk—a step she knew, and was waiting for; and all her face brightened up as *she laid down her volume*, and went out into the hall to *meet the new arrival*. A tall, dark youth was there, throw-

ing off his plaid, and keeping down a couple of thoroughbred dogs, who were leaping upon him and testifying their exuberant welcome a little too forcibly.

"Down, Hector, down! Be off, Scamp! I'll thrash you both directly. Ah! Cecil, you there? Bless you, my child, for the fine fire I see you have for me. I am half frozen—chilled to the very marrow. I must come and get a warm before I go upstairs to dress. What a nuisance these dogs are!"

"If you speak firmly to them, they will go."

"Ah, yes, I dare say; but I haven't the heart to cow the poor brutes when they are so delighted to see me. Now really, Scamp, that is too bad!"

"Scamp! Hector!" said Cecil, with quiet emphasis.

The dogs sobered down at once. Hector looked as ashamed of himself as a great dog could. Little Scamp made a whine, half of apology, half of sorrow, and lay down on the mat, with her nose between her paws, and her paws in penitential attitude.

"Go!" said Cecil, pointing to the door which led towards the offices; and the dogs, with their tails down and their eyes full of regret, trotted instantly into the kitchen.

"Poor things," said the young man, as he drew up the easy-chair his sister had placed for him, and prepared to make himself comfortable. "You are hard upon them, Cecil."

"I think not; I am displeased if they go unfed and uncared for. I like to take them with me when I walk or ride, but I will not have them on this side of the house."

"Little Scamp would be in no one's way. I wonder you can resist her, Cecil; she has such winning ways."

"I never yield *only* to winning ways, Oswald, my dear."

"I know you don't, Cecil, my dear. If you had lived some few thousand years ago King Solomon would have preferred you to the Queen of Sheba, and he would have described you in the Book of Proverbs. He would, indeed, oh, most wise, and virtuous, and vigorous-minded sister! What have you been after to-day?"

"After you left I ordered the dinner, and spent half an hour in my store-room; then Jane came to know if she

could be spared to go home next week, because her sailor lover has come back from China ; and I had a good talk with her about that young man. I am not at all certain he is doing her good, but she does not seem inclined to give him up. Then I went to the school, and was there till half-past twelve. I am afraid we shall lose our school-mistress at Christmas, Oswald. Mary Jones would like to go to service, and I think of having her here under Jane ; she would be trained against Jane leaves, as leave she will, ere long, I am convinced. She is set upon that young man, silly girl ! ”

“ Why silly girl ? The young fellow is respectable, and he is getting a good livelihood. ”

“ I am not sure that he is perfectly steady. She ought to try him ; I want her to put him upon several years’ probation. ”

“ Now, really, Cecil, I did not think I had so inhuman a sister. But, forgive me, you are not qualified to give judgment in affairs of the heart ; Jane has had experiences which you cannot even faintly imagine. It is easy for you to prescribe—you who never had the malady. ”

“ You own it is a malady, then ? ”

“ Well, yes, to some extent. The Queens of Sheba and the Martinetta-Tuppers say so, don’t they ? Some people have it worse than others. ”

“ I wish you would have it a little worse ; I can respect love when I think it is the real thing. Yes, I can respect it, if, as you say, I cannot properly sympathise with it ; and I tell you, Oswald Uffadyne, your love is not of the right sort. ”

“ What is the right sort, oh ! Minerva ? ”

“ A sort that will *wash*, that will *wear*, that will bear all the rubs of life. ”

“ You talk like a draper, Cecil. But what you say reminds me that I had a letter from Florence this morning. They are quite settled in Queen Square, and the business is put into train ; Mr. York is to manage it all. ”

“ Poor little Florry, shut up in a west-central square ; I wonder how she likes it. I wonder that Mr. Guise thinks it

worth while taking so much trouble, and putting himself about for the sake of *money*. He is rich enough as it is, and Florry is his only child."

"Not so very rich, Cecil, and he will be poorer if he lose this law-suit. Certainly, if he gain it, he will be wealthy enough, and Florry will be one of the first heiresses of the day."

"And you would consent to marry one of the first heiresses of the day?"

"Cecil, you know our engagement was concluded before there was any question of all this heap of money. You cannot mean to do me such an injustice as to suppose that I am seeking to marry a fortune?"

"No! no! Oswald. God forbid I should judge you so wickedly; I could not love you another hour if I thought you were a contemptible money-hunter, looking upon God's holy institution of marriage as a means to an end, and such an end! But I wish—I must say it, Oswald—I wish you had never been engaged to Florence Guise."

"Could anything be more suitable? Am I not the next male heir, and do not some of the estates, the most valuable, pass by female issue?"

"That is it; the marriage was clearly *expedient*! Florence was trained to love you; you were trained to love her. She is very pretty, very lovely, as good and sweet a little thing as ever lived, but *not* the wife I would have chosen for you, Oswald."

"I never thought of asking you to choose me a wife, Cecil. Nay, I should not have liked a wife of your choosing; I could not marry a busy, strong-minded woman with a mission. Florence is quite to my liking, so sweet, and pure, and tender; so perfectly refined, so *good*; even you, Cecil, must call her good."

"I do; she is very good—too good for you."

"Thank you. Don't you think, my dear, you may carry your love of plain-speaking too far?"

"Not as regards you; I am the elder, also I am—the stronger."

"I am not quite so sure of that; but, Cecil, surely you do *not want to do mischief*: Florence loves me."

"I know she does, Oswald ; she loves you dearly, poor little thing ! and her love exceeds yours, and that should never be. The greater love should always be with the man, at least before marriage."

"And not after ? Oh, Martinetta Tupperina, thou most sapient philosopher in petticoats, who speakest of that which thou knowest not ! But you are wrong, Cecil ; I do love Florence."

"All the same, Oswald ; I wish you were not engaged to marry her. I wish you had had to fight your own way in the world—to work, to strive, to toil. You have the making of a grand man in you, brother Oswald ; but all will be marred, because the best part of your nature will never be called forth. I hate these silken, golden lives."

"Ah, you would like an iron life—iron-grey, I suppose ?"

"Anything that gave one's energies scope, that taught one patience, and endurance, and *faith*."

"Cecil, my dear, I think that you are talking foolishly. All is not gold that glitters, and the lives that seem so golden are often only grey interwoven with gold. I believe that grey days of pain and weariness, and golden days of joy and sunshine, come to all. Also, I believe that no life is golden from beginning to end, nor any life uniformly grey. And I am not sure that a shadowless life would be so very fair after all. However, God knows best, and gives us the grey and the gold in due proportion. Now I am warm, and I will go and dress for dinner ; your philosophy has not taken away my appetite, I am glad to say."

CHAPTER VII.

TO-MORROW.

ESTHER went to bed one night very weary and out of spirits. She had worked hard all day ; the children had been very *cross and mischievous*. Lizzie had been unusually pert, and *Dick and his father* had had words, and Mrs. Hellicar had

indulged in a fit of palpitations, and subsequently, hysterics ; and the baby, divorced from the maternal bosom, lifted up his shrill pipes and wept mightily, refusing to be comforted with the bottle, and strenuously protesting against Daffy's elixir, which Esther, in all good faith, strove to administer lavishly. Then Mr. Guise had had one of his terrible attacks, and Florence had been shut up in his bed-room nearly all day, and the drawing-room was deserted ; and when Esther went up about eight o'clock in the evening to carry down the tea-tray, she found the table undisturbed, but the two cups and saucers missing, and she conjectured that Miss Guise was taking her tea by her father's bedside, and would not be seen any more that night.

Esther could not wait, though she wanted sorely to say a few words to Florence, for there was Fanny to undress, and Tommy to get to sleep—for the spoilt child refused to be put into bed awake, after the fashion of sensible, well-mannered children of his age. Then Mr. Macgregor had come home, reporting himself on sick-leave, and demanding a basin of gruel, and a foot-bath well seasoned with mustard and salt. And Mrs. Warburton, on the ground-floor, had sent out for a sweetbread, which was to be delicately dressed for her supper, and to be ready with stout, and double Gloucester to follow, exactly at ten minutes past nine. So that it was very clear Esther could not afford to waste her time in lingering on any pretext ; neither had she leisure for a hearty good cry, nor for one of her favourite soliloquies, which were sometimes as good as meat and drink to her after a harassing day of hard toil, and no thanks for her labours. She must go down and consult Mrs. Rundell's "*Domestic Cookery*," before she could attempt to fricassee the sweetbread ; and she must attend to Mr. Macgregor's gruel, for Biddy's achievements in the way of gruels and porridges were generally stupendous failures, and the Scotchman, being naturally of acid temperament, became doubly and trebly acidulated if his beloved oatmeal were not judiciously prepared. He once told Biddy her soul was in danger because she brought him his porridge burnt three mornings in succession.

It was nearly twelve when Esther went upstairs to her

attic, and she was so tired that the last flight of stairs—steep as attic-stairs generally are—were to her as the last straw on the overladen camel. She sat down on the first broken chair near the door, and began to sob almost as hysterically as her aunt—to poor Biddy's extreme consternation, for nothing frightened her so much as to see "Miss Esther taking-on like." Esther was, as a rule, so brave and so stoical, that she never lamented, and seldom complained, except to her own heart; and it seemed to Biddy as if the world must come to an end; at any rate, as if the whole crazy piece 'of machinery known as the Hellicars' household must collapse at once, if Miss Esther gave way and cried as if she had no spirit left in her.

"Oh, Miss Esther, darlint!" exclaimed poor Biddy, pathetically; "Oh! what a conflustration ye put me into! Arrah now, jewel! asthore, mavourneen! dhry yer purty eyes! Keep up yer heart, avourneen; bad cess to the Hellicars, one and all! Och! acushla! shure and the good time's a-comin'! I see it in my tay-grounds this very night! I did, Miss Esther, by St. Pathrick, and by the Holy Virgin, and by the blessed St. Bridget, I did, indeed! It was a weddin' I see comin' on, and you was in it, jewel! I see the ring—the rale gowld ring—and the husban' ye'll have—a fine, spankin' boy, six feet and more byont in his stockin' feet; wid eyes like an aigle's, as black as sloes, and hair like a raven's wing, and straight as a poplar-tree, and the way ov a prince about him! And he'll be here, Miss Esther, in no time, and then it's you that'll be the lady and wear a satin gownd, and feathers, and diamonds; and it's you that'll be good to poor Biddy, and take her away from the slavery, and make her your own confidential servant till she gets a boy ov her own, and consints to the blessed sacrament of matrimony. So cheer up, alanna! there's more than a silver lining to all these yer clouds. There's many a grey morning that make's a gowlden afternoon, and when the gowld comes furst, thin vary often, faix! it's more than grey before it's night.—it's *black*—black as *purdition*, to which Mистер Macgregor and the *misthress*, save her! sez I'm hastening. Best 'av' the *grey furst*, mavourneen, and the gowld afterwards; best 'av'

the shower and the cowl'd winds early in the year, and the sunshine in the summer ! Best work hard, and get the hard words now, asthore, and 'av' all the love presently ; 'av' patience, and it will all come out right, jest like a fairy-tale. Only don't cry and sob yer heart out, for it does no good at all at all ; it neither meks yer here nor there, an' it spoils yer beauty, an'll mek yer heed ache reddy to split to-morrow mornin,' and you've got to jug a hare for the ground floor, and make white soup for the drawing-room ! ”

By this time Esther had had her cry out, and felt a good deal better for it ; but to cry any longer would certainly be foolish, for it would, as Biddy said, make her head ache ; and the morrow would be a busy day, and the prospects of the hare to be jugged was oppressive, since she was not quite clear how Mrs. Warburton's directions were to be carried out ; and as for the white soup which Miss Guise had ordered for her father, she had not the remotest idea how it was to be concocted. Moreover, Mrs. Hellicar had announced her intention of staying in bed till dinner-time in order to recruit her strength, or, at least, “rest her shattered frame” !

“What a fool I am !” said Esther, presently, wiping her eyes ; “really, Biddy, I am ashamed of myself, but I feel so tired and so weak ; my knees trembled as I came upstairs. And aunt was so ill-tempered ; and she had a religious fit, and that always makes me feel ill ; and the children were so tiresome ; and I could not get a word with Miss Guise.”

“Did you get any supper ?” asked Biddy with sudden energy.

“No ; I was too tired to eat, and I had no time. Indeed, I forgot my supper.”

“That's it, then ! Arrah, mavourneen ! it's the bit and the dhrop ye're wantin'. Och ! now, if I had but a taste of the potheen for ye, it would hearten ye up *wonderful*. But the aitin' and drinkin' must be done, or sorra a bit of strength or sinse ye've got left in you. I'll just nip down, and get ye some beer and bread-and-cheese, alanna !”

And Biddy was good as her word ; she did nip down, *carrying the candle with her*, leaving Esther in the darkness,

to her own reflections ; but she soon came up again, with the homely refreshments she had mentioned in her hands, and insisted on Esther "aitin' and drinkin'," which, for peace-sake, Esther essayed to do, and was surprised to find how easy it was after the first mouthful.

"There, now !" said Biddy, triumphantly, "it's you that's the lady, an' no mistake ! Now ye've got some life and sperrit in ye ! Now jist put off yer clothes, and get into bed, and go to sleep, and wake up in the morning like a lark. The throubles of to-day is all over, praise the Lord ! an' it's ov no manner of use thinking about the throubles ov to-morrow till they come."

And Biddy fell on her knees and began to tell her beads with sudden energy, and by dint of making extra speed she soon got over her devotions, and lay down by little Fanny's side, and quickly gave audible indications of being sound asleep. Esther was trying to follow her example, and she was just happily sinking into a state of forgetfulness, when Fanny awoke with a shriek and a moan from one of her bad dreams, and immediately commenced to cry as vigorously as if it were noon instead of midnight. She refused to be comforted, or to listen to reason, and scolding and coaxing were equally inefficacious ; and presently Tommy woke up, and added his fretful wail to the general disturbance ; and then Biddy was aroused, and lastly Lizzie sat up in bed and began to rub her eyes, and scold with a genius worthy of her mamma. Mrs. Hellicar herself could scarcely have done it better.

"Why *don't* you make them quiet ?" urged Lizzie at last, frantic at having her rest broken, and finding that a cuff and a shake did nothing towards composing either child. "What ma says is quite true, you're not worth your keep, and what you stay here for I can't imagine—to think you can't get two children to sleep ; I dare say you woke them up ! Hush ! you provoking little wretches ! Fanny ! I'll give you such a beating in another minute ! Yes, and I'll put you up the chimney, Tom, and there's a black man there, that eats up *naughty children* that cry of nights. Hark ! I hear him *growling now* !—he'll have you in another minute."

The frightened child stifled his wail in the pillow, and dared not look towards the fire-place, lest he should see the head of the terrible ogre who dwelt up the chimney, and supped on little boys. But he trembled and gasped till Esther feared he would go into a fit, and she took him into her bed and comforted him with the assurance that the ogre should not touch him, for he never came near grown people, and she would hold him fast. And at last Tommy fell asleep in her arms; and Fanny, finding that no one heeded her cries, consented to be pacified and settle herself off again into another nap; and Biddy and Lizzie soon followed her example, and then Esther was left the sole watcher in the dark and dreary attic. It was not often that she could not sleep, in spite of every disturbance: generally she laid her head down upon her pillow, and in the sweet repose of youth and perfect health forgot the day's annoyances; and the morning found her strengthened and refreshed for the toils and trials of another sixteen or eighteen hours, as the case might be.

But now she heard the church-clocks in the neighbourhood strike the quarters and the hours, and the distant murmur of the Holborn traffic ceased entirely, and she knew that ere long it would be time to rise, and commence the duties of another day. Her thoughts were very bitter as she lay in weary wakefulness by Lizzie's side, listening to Biddy's loud snoring, and to the heavy breathing of the children. They were bitterer even than they were a month ago, when in that very room, a few hours before the arrival of the Guises, she had resolved that she would do *something* towards bettering her condition—the “something,” as usual, ending in miserable nothingness. Improve her condition, indeed! how was it to be done, unless she hazarded everything, broke loose from all restraint, and cast herself upon the world? And she knew that the world was not kindly to such friendless candidates for its capricious favour, and she shuddered as the thought of what might befall her, if, unprotected and alone, she adventured herself in those terrible London streets. “*But,*” she exclaimed, speaking aloud, as *was her wont*, but in so low a tone that the sleepers around

her were not disturbed—"but what can I do? I cannot go on staying here. My aunt asked me to-day why I kept sponging—yes, she called it *sponging*—on them year after year. She wondered I had not more spirit than to stop in a house where I was not wanted, eating and drinking at the expense of people who were hard put to it to find bread for their own children. But God knows I am not the idle creature she says I am. I do earn my bread, if anybody ever did. I work hard, I waste nothing, I take only my needful food, and submit to such clothing as any decent servant would despise, and I put up with all the insolence and worry of the children—what more *can* I do? They say I am ill-tempered and sulky, and go into awful passions. Well, I know I do; but for one kind word, one real *loving* word, I could humble myself to the dust, and be content to serve them as a slave. I had a sort of hope—how foolish it was, to be sure!—that something would come of the Guises being in the house, as soon as I saw Miss Guise's sweet face. I fancied I saw the friend I needed—the one who would stretch out to me a sister's hand, and lift me into another and more blessed atmosphere. And she is very kind, and I am always better in my mind after talking to her; but she has been nearly six weeks in the house, and I am just where I was before she came. Am I discontented? Am I impatient? Am I wanting to get out of the station in which it has pleased Providence to place me? Aunt says I am so wicked—so hardened in my sins. She warns me that I am heaping up wrath for myself against the day of wrath. Am I—am I indeed making God angry with me? The Bible says He is merciful and pitiful, and that His loving-kindnesses are great; and if it be so, surely He will not deal harshly with *me*, a poor desolate girl, who knows nothing, and has nobody to teach her! I do wish I might have been confirmed; I feel sure it would have done me good somehow. At any rate, I should have seen the clergyman, and have heard something from him, and I could have asked him the questions that trouble me so much. But *she* said I was not *fit for the ordinance* of the Church, and she called me a child of *Satan*, given up to all iniquity. I am sure I do not want

to belong to the Evil One, and I cannot believe that God will let him have those who are not his willingly. Still, if aunt Hellicar's religion is *the* thing that God requires of me, I am afraid I can never, never conform to it. What is the use of reading the Bible, and quoting texts, and talking piously, and going on about the end of the world, if you are to be just as ill-tempered as the people that mock at God? Sometimes, on Sunday, I think I will try; I *will* get converted. I say I will give myself no rest or peace till I am sure I am what they call a 'child of God.' And then aunt begins about the solemn truths we have heard, and how this world is passing away, and will soon be burnt up, or something of the kind; and the next minute she is so cross, and find such fault, that we are all glad to get away and leave her. How *can* piety and peevishness, and religion and repining, and godliness and impatience and fault-finding go together? And then, giving up everything! Religion seems to be a very dismal thing—at least, the sort of religion that I have seen most of. I really believe its chief use is to be a cloak for all sorts of wretched tempers and selfishness; for now I come to think of it, the most religious people I know are the most disagreeable. I quite thought Miss Guise was religious, and I hoped she was, for I should like to be like her; but aunt says she is not, for '*by their fruits ye shall know them*;' and she does not see in Miss Guise the fruits of a regenerate nature. I wonder what fruits one is to know a Christian by? Sourness, I suppose, and snappishness, and hard words, and complaining of one's lot—I complain, I know, but then I am not a Christian—and frowns, and thinking all the rest of the world hopelessly wicked; and gloominess! Those are the fruits I have witnessed; and as for religion being a support and a solace, I think one may be supported and solaced very well without it, to judge from my aunt's state of mind when things go contrary. Oh, dear! the world is a dreary place, though; and for one happy person there are twenty unhappy ones. And things are so unequal. Why should this dull, grey, colourless life be mine? Why should Miss Guise have *such a lovely, golden life*—why should she have *friends and fortune, and rank, and beauty, and education, and*

such a tender father—while I am lonely and penniless, and ugly and ignorant, and unloved, uncared for? Why was she born to so much joy, and I to so much sorrow; she to blessing, I to a curse? What had she done to deserve the happiness? what had I done to deserve the misery? Why should the golden summer-sunshine, and the flowers, and the singing-birds be hers, and mine the grey wintry twilight, and the leafless trees, and the silence and the dreariness? Oh! my God, why didst Thou create me to such an empty, loveless life? Why call me into existence only to punish me? I could be so happy if only I had something to be happy with. I could be content with only a very little love, a very little brightness; if I could only see some prospect of better days, I could be so patient! Ah, I could thrive upon what others scorned—where others starved I could feed and be satisfied! It is so little that I want, so very little! and yet, oh! my God, Thou wilt not give it to me! I say—grant me some small measure of happiness, and it is not granted! Is it indeed that Thou art so angry with me, oh! my God, that Thou wilt grant me nothing that I ask for? Art Thou indeed an angry God, watching for our shortcomings, and ready to take prompt vengeance on us for our sins? It cannot be if Thou art our *Father*—for even earthly fathers are not hard upon their children—and shall the Heavenly Father be more unkind than the father of poor erring flesh and blood? Oh! my God, I am very weary and very dark; give me rest, give me light; forgive me if I speak to Thee rashly, but I have no friend save Thee. Oh! be my Father and my Friend, and not an angry Judge spying out my sins and taking vengeance. I could love my Father and my Friend, but I could only dread my Judge!”

And a still, small voice seemed to whisper to the girl's heart—“My child! my child! be of good cheer; all shall yet be well: wait thou My time!”

“Yes! I will wait a little longer,” she said to herself. “I will try to be patient; I think God does hear me, and I think, too, He is not so wrathful against me as *she* says He *is against all unconverted people*. If I could but love God, *it would be so easy to serve Him*; and, loving Him, my heart

would perhaps be satisfied, and I should be content with my lot. I will try, then, to be patient, and wait ; I will try to love God to-morrow—that is, to-day, for to-morrow has come. Yes ; I will begin a new life to-morrow—to-morrow.”

And still thinking of “trying,” and murmuring “to-morrow,” the poor child fell asleep at last.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT TO-MORROW BROUGHT FORTH.

ESTHER could scarcely believe she had slept at all, when she was roused by the striking of a match, and saw Biddy at her bedside, lighting the candle with more haste than good speed, while she muttered, “Bad luck to yer, then, for a worry this blessed morning, when we’ve bin and overslept ourselves. Oh ! Miss Esther, dear, wake up ! it’s gone seven, as sure as I’m a Christian !”

“Gone seven, Biddy ? surely not ! it cannot be more than five !”

“Five, alanna ! Shure and mee heart wishes it were but three ! But I know it’s seven by the sounds outside ; and the milk’s bin into the airy and left itself, and we’ll be hear-in’ the postman next, and not a fire lighted, and more breakfasts to get than I can count ! Hark ! there’s something striking ; it’s the furst quarter. Oh ! Miss Esther, make haste and put on ye, or the misthress’ll be rating us till we don’t know whether we do be Christian souls, or haythen savages ! Och ! if the holy saints would but make her milder, or else take her to glory. Shure there is no harm in wishin’ she would go to glory ! by me troth. An’ it’s meself that wishes Biddy O’Flanigan was there at this blessid moment, instead of in this cowl’d attic, putting on me by the light o’ one flarin’ tallow candle. An’ there’s millions an’ millions o’ waxen tapers burnin’ up in glory ! an’ I wish we was both there, Miss Esther !”

Esther thought it would be very pleasant, for she was cold and miserable, and her head ached furiously ; and now that

"to-morrow" had fairly arrived it was no easy task to begin the life of patience and control which she had planned to herself several hours before. To-morrows that have quite an inviting and even seductive aspect over-night, seem quite another thing when they turn into "to-days," especially when they are viewed by the light of a guttering dip-candle in a dirty iron candlestick, with the certain prospect of plenty of hard work, and unlimited scolding downstairs. Meanwhile, she dressed hurriedly, but though the old coburg was still "to the fore," as Biddy put it, it was skilfully mended. Esther had hunted up some strips of old cotton-velvet, and she had bound the delapidated hem, first taking out one breadth that defied the sempstress's art, and by dint of shortening, and reducing generally, and careful darns, and a little fresh trimming, she really looked almost decent, though not even the cotter's thrifty dame, who, with her needle and her shears, made "auld claes look amaist as weel's the new," could have achieved anything like a success in the matter of the unfortunate morning-costume of Esther Kendall.

As generally happens when one is behindhand with time, everything that morning went perversely. It was very dark, for a dreary fog had settled down on the W.C. district; the fires refused to be lighted, and, when lighted, objected to burn freely; the chimneys smoked, the kettles made up their minds that boil they would not till the very latest moment; the cat drank the milk that had left itself in the area; and Dick came down so infuriate at not finding his breakfast ready, that he took to abusing Biddy and her country unmercifully, and so exasperated the young Irishwoman that Esther began to be afraid that the house was about to be disgraced by an actual pugilistic encounter.

As the morning advanced a general contrariness continued to prevail, and Biddy grew desperate, and slapped the children, and gave her mistress warning to quit at the month's end; and this time it was to be in earnest—she would go, if she had to tramp back to ould Ireland on foot, and swim across the sea! But the hours wore on, and the *day dragged on its weary way*, and the hare was juggled for *Mrs. Warburton*, though not at all to her satisfaction, and

Mr. Macgregor was served with mutton-broth that he avowed was only fit for pig-wash ; but he spoke of the broth in the plural number, and said *they* were undeserving the name of human food !

Mrs. Hellicar remained in bed, being visited again with palpitations ; and the baby showed symptoms of a fit ; and Lizzie came home from school in tantrums because she had lost the music-prize, and she worked off her excitement a little by beating Fanny and Tom, and sneering at Esther for not knowing what a Mazurka was.

The white soup was the only thing that seemed likely to give any satisfaction, and that was a source of infinite perplexity to the inexperienced girl, who was called away from her cookery every two or three minutes, and was, besides, embarrassed by the deficiency of necessary culinary implements and vessels. Esther scarcely knew which she craved for most, new clothes, or new saucepans, or a gridiron which should not be wanting in bars—for the one she had in daily use let the small chops and fish, and especially the kidneys, tumble through into the fire, in spite of all her watchfulness ; and the frying-pan had holes in it, and the great kettle leaked, and the roasting-jack was hopelessly invalided, and only performed its functions by dint of the stimulus of being incessantly wound up. But every failure was Esther's fault, and every spoiled dinner or breakfast-dish was added to the long category of her sins, original and actual ; and when she felt quite well and in tolerable spirits, she took all the scoldings, and warnings, and solemn denunciations with remarkable equanimity, scarcely hearing and not at all heeding the weary, pattering sentences that fell thick and sharp as hail from the lips of Mrs. Hellicar.

But to-day there were many weak places in her sullen, apathetic armour, and strive as she would to feel stolid and stupid, she was stung to the quick by her aunt's cruel, taunting speeches ; and she was sorely wounded, and trembling in every limb, when, late in the afternoon, she went up to her garret to dress. Of course the sleepless night, the heavy, unceasing *headache*, and the fast she had kept all day, *from sheer want of appetite*, had much to do with the

unwonted sense of misery that seemed a burden greater than she could bear ; but whatever might be the actual cause of her suffering, she felt really ill, stunned with the hard thrusts she had received, and overpoweringly fatigued. The effort of changing her frock and arranging her hair so exhausted her that she threw herself on her bed, just to rest for five minutes, as she told herself, and, as might have been expected, she fell fast asleep, and only woke up to see Mrs. Hellicar standing by her, candle in hand, storming at her with a power of lung that argued very little for the delicacy of her health, or for the indisposition with which she had been all day afflicted.

For a moment Esther was confused and dizzy, and the torrent of petty abuse seemed to be part of a miserable dream ; but ere long she was fully awake, and comprehended that she had committed the unpardonable sin of lying down in the day-time, and going to sleep, sundry household duties being still unperformed. The first words that she clearly comprehended were : “ Such wicked, good-for-nothing idleness, and the people ringing their bells as if they would pull them down, and Biddy in her sulks, and me that weak with my poor shattered frame, and palpitations all the morning, and trembling now in every nerve ! Are you not afraid, you unfeeling, cruel girl, that some dreadful judgment will overtake you ? ”

The foolish, unjust words, and the thin, harsh voice fairly maddened Esther, and she answered bluntly, “ No, I am not.”

Mrs. Hellicar puffed a huge sigh, like the lingering, dying exhalation of a pair of broken bellows, and appealing to the washing-stand, remarked, “ She has no sense of her sins ; she is treading the broad way that leadeth to destruction, and I’ve warned her, and she will not hear. She is like the deaf adder that——” But Mrs. Hellicar forgot what the deaf adder did, or did not do ; she could never remember the whole of a quotation, so she took refuge in fresh upbraidings, commanding Esther to rise before some judgment came upon her. But Esther did not stir, she was getting gradually *strung up to a pitch* that would enable her to be far more than *a match for poor foolish, self-deluded, vixenish Myra Hellicar.*

"Judgments!" she exclaimed at last, "I tell you what it is, aunt, I am sick of all this cant. No, I am not afraid of any judgment coming upon me, for I do my best, and if I offend God through ignorance it is your fault, not mine. You keep me from learning anything; you give me no time for reading or thinking, and you bewilder me with your talk about the unregenerate heart, and the devil, and the sinner's doom. Judgment, indeed! could I have any worse judgment come upon me than being subject to *you*, and obliged to bear all your wicked tempers? Judgments! I know in your secret heart, aunt Myra, you are afraid of judgments coming on yourself; you know that your religion is all talk—and such talk, too! Repent yourself, and when I see you patient, and kind, and uncomplaining, and gentle in your temper, maybe I will think about repenting too, and I may come to believe in Christianity. As it is, *I don't*—I flatly tell you so; at least not such Christianity as yours; and if yours is the right sort—only I know in my heart it is not—I had rather be a heathen that never heard the sound of a church-bell or saw a Bible."

"To think that I should live to be stung by this viper I have nourished in my bosom!" said Mrs. Hellicar, clasping her hands after the fashion of a plaster-of-Paris "Little Samuel," and this time appealing from the washing-stand to the cracked ceiling right above her head. "Oh, my heart! Oh, you wicked girl, you will be the death of me! But I had better die—no one cares; my husband can do just as well without me, and Dick would be glad; I know he would rejoice to put my death in the papers, and you—you would be delighted too; you wish my departure."

"No, I don't," returned Esther, savagely; "I would rather you lived and grew better, and if you grew really better and kinder I should want you to go on living. At any rate, you are not fit to die now—you are not at all prepared, you know."

"Not prepared?—she says I am not *prepared*!" shrieked Mrs. Hellicar. It touched her almost as keenly as if Esther had declared her to be vulgar and uneducated. She liked *equally well to enact the rôle* of the fine lady and the saint.

When most amiable, that is, when nothing happened to put her out, the former character prevailed; when her temper was in a state of fusion, the latter; and the more fretful and savage her state of mind, the higher were her pretensions to eminent but unappreciated sanctity. "Not prepared!" she echoed again; "I that have been so near death, that I was all but measured for my coffin. Not prepared, indeed! Is *she* prepared herself, I should very much like to know?"

This interrogation was mildly addressed to the crazy chest of drawers close by, and as, under the circumstances, no response to the inquiry could be reasonably expected, Mrs. Hellicar proceeded to reply to her own question, giving it as her opinion that Esther's cup of iniquity was almost full, that the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, and of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, and of Pharaoh, King of Egypt, and of the wicked Haman, and of Lot's wife, and of Ananias and Sapphira, and of Judas Iscariot, would speedily overtake her, so that she could never be a "brand plucked from the burning," as up to that moment Mrs. Hellicar had hoped and prayed she might some day be.

"Oh! as to that," returned Esther, "you know very well, aunt, that if you got to heaven, and I came in afterwards, you would be horribly disappointed, and you would try to prejudice the angels against me. But you will never—no, *never* get to heaven, unless you alter. Heaven is no place for people who are continually losing their tempers, and fretting, and grumbling, and saying the nastiest, most cutting things they can think of. A pretty heaven it would be—the other place could not be worse! No, no, aunt, heaven would never suit you, for there would be nobody to scold and grumble at, and the angels and the happy spirits would take no interest in your faded gentility, nor in your fine dresses and ornaments that are got out of the sweat of other people's brows, and wrung out of the toil of their hands and the weariness of their bones. Don't you remember what our clergyman said a Sunday or two ago—the Sunday you *trod upon Mrs. Shank's new moire*? He said heaven would *be no heaven* to those who had not begun to make a little

heaven about them here on earth. And I am sure, aunt, you make this house —*hell*!—there, I've said it!"

"And out of this house you go, Esther Kendall, before you are twelve hours older," shrieked Mrs. Hellicar. And, quite forgetting that saints don't rave, and denounce, and call hard names, and curse in their hearts if not with their tongues, she proceeded to use very strong language indeed, making use of most reprehensible terms, and charging Esther with all manner of crimes, and even with those which she had never had any opportunity of committing. Nor did she confine her anger to words only; as she gave vent to her rage, it expanded and intensified itself more and more, and she shook Esther as violently as her strength permitted, and administered several slaps in the face which were not wanting in heartiness. She had been provoked, of course, but then it was she who had given the first provocation, and furnished the *casus belli*.

"I have often told you to go, and now you *shall* tramp," continued Mrs. Hellicar fiercely. "I would not keep you in my house another day, inciting my servant to rebellion, and poisoning the minds of my innocent offspring, and laying traps for *Dick*. Yes, Miss, I've seen through your artifices. I've been watching you for weeks and weeks, and I've seen what I have seen." And Mrs. Hellicar looked as if she could say a great deal more if she chose.

But Esther was roused now, verily. She had been comparatively calm, though bitter and defiant. Now she sprang from the bed, and stood beside her aunt, who quailed under the steady gaze of the brilliant eyes, saying, in such a tone—a tone that made her adversary's heart quake—"What have you seen? Speak! You shall speak, I say! So you can tell lies about me? Well, you have always done that, more or less, for you have declared that I am idle, which you know is not the case, and I have borne with it, for it did not matter. But you shall not say these things; you shall not blacken my character, if you tell lies about Dick and me. I will—I will—"

"What will you do?" asked Mrs. Hellicar, tauntingly.

Esther burst into tears. She knew how powerless she

was. She knew that she could not silence any cruel tongues, if once they took up a slander against her. Her aunt had stabbed her now, and no mistake, and Myra Hellicar was not slow to pursue her advantage, and she poured out a long, wordy harangue on Esther's unworthiness, and her own protracted and generous forbearance, of which her hapless niece scarcely heard a single sentence, so great was the disturbance of her mind respecting the insinuation just thrown out against her modesty and prudence ; and when at last she collected her scattered senses, she was alone.

Then she began to recall all that had passed, and she felt that Mrs. Hellicar was now offended past hope of reconciliation. She must have been mad, surely, to say what she had said ! She had thought the same things a hundred times, but she had never ventured, never even thought it right, to give them utterance. It would be useless to humble herself, for pardon would not be accorded ; the forgiveness of a fellow-creature's trespasses was not a clause in the creed of her aunt Myra, and Esther knew it well. Her aunt had said she should go, and go she must, of course ; even if her uncle interfered it would be a ceaseless purgatory now for the two to remain sheltered by one roof ; and had she not been wishing to go away from Queen Square—go away anywhere, so that she might be free to work her own way in the world ? She had longed with a mighty longing to escape from the weary thralldom of her youth, but she had not dared to take her fate in her own hands, lest worse should possibly betide ; but now it was decided for her, and the vague dream in which she had so often indulged had become a reality, and she was actually turned out of doors ! Leaving the Hellicars was nothing ; the mere idea of quitting them was positive delight ; but where could she go to, where find food and raiment ? Also what would the Guises think of her when she was gone ; for she felt sure that her aunt Myra would tell them that she had run away, or else that she had been dismissed on account of extreme unworthiness, and she would give them a catalogue of all her transgressions, real and imaginary, and make them *believe that she was truly the wicked and ungrateful girl she was represented to be.*

“And where shall I go?” she asked herself again and again. “I have no friends, and next to no money—not enough to pay for respectable lodgings for a single night. Oh! my God, what will become of me? If Thou really art my Father, care for me now, and provide for me. Yes, I will commit my way to *Him*, and surely He will direct me.”

She felt stronger after she had prayed: then it occurred to her that she had done wrong in speaking so plainly to Mrs. Hellicar. She had spoken only absolute truths, she knew; but they were truths spoken in anger, and hatred, and malice, and all uncharitableness—not in love; and such truth-speaking must be as displeasing to God as lying. Some people make such a virtue of always telling the truth, forgetting that they may sin with the tongue without one single false utterance. So many people are ready to quote the Divine precept, “speaking the truth,” omitting the close of the sentence—“*in love!*” As well might they say, “be ye angry,” forgetting to add the qualification which ensues—“*and sin not!*”

“Yes! I was wrong; I had no business to say it,” was Esther’s final decision. “Some one ought to speak plainly to her—but not I. I really believe she thinks she is a very religious woman, and she has no idea how mean, and vain, and spiteful, and altogether hateful she is in her behaviour. She has made use of a certain phraseology till she fancies it is really the language of her heart. Oh! I hope I shall never be a self-deceiver, never think myself good and worthy of esteem, while all the while I am wicked and despicable!”

At last she resolved to go down and tell her aunt that she was sorry, and she hastened to go below before she could waver in her purpose. It was not three hours since she came upstairs, but it seemed as if months, or at least weeks, had elapsed since last she had passed the drawing-room door. In the kitchen she found not only her aunt and Lizzie, but her uncle, who had just come in from his office, and was waiting for his supper. Biddy was frying sausages in the nearly *incapacitated* frying-pan, and Mrs. Hellicar was *genteelly sipping* at a glass of something hot—“a little

stimulant, which she disliked extremely, but took as a duty when her palpitations came on ! ”

Lizzie laughed a sneering laugh as Esther came in. Mr. Hellicar became absorbed in Biddy's frizzling proceedings, and his wife took a long draught at her gin-and-water, and then folded her hands on her lap with an air of mingled dignity and resignation. Esther stood before her, trembling : “ Aunt ! I am very sorry for what I said just now. I was in a passion. I ought not to have given way to it.”

“ Oh, yes ! we can be humble enough now,” returned Mrs. Hellicar, coolly. “ I thought we should come down with our high and mightiness before long. Very well. I am glad you see your error ; but you go all the same. I wash my hands of you ! I shake off the dust of my feet against you—*go !* ” And Mrs. Hellicar went through a pretence of manual ablutions, and kicked her slipper under the dresser in testimony of her sincerity.

“ Where can I go, aunt ? ”

“ Wherever you choose, Esther ; the world is all before you.”

“ Must I go—to-night ? ”

“ The sooner you are out of my sight the better. You can go as soon as ever you like. You may take all your clothes.”

“ She can't go to-night, and she shan't,” interposed Mr. Hellicar. “ Myra ! are you a *woman*, that you would turn a girl out on London streets at this time of night ? ”

“ Oh, very well ! ” said Mrs. Hellicar hysterically ; “ I might have known how it would have been ! You snake ! so you set my own husband against me, do you ? ”

“ Nothing of the sort, Myra ; but Esther is my niece. My poor Jane loved her brother and his child.”

“ I am your wife, your lawful wife, Mr. Hellicar ! ”

“ I know you are, worse luck ! ” replied the gentleman. “ Going to church with you, and putting a ring on your finger was about the worst day's work I ever did ! I wish marriages were like Parliaments, and came to an end of *themselves* every seven years.”

Myra immediately relapsed into hysterics, under cover of

which Esther left the kitchen. Her uncle stole after her, and whispered—"Stop here to-night, whatever happens. I suppose you must go to-morrow; she is so enraged. Why the dickens couldn't you keep a civil tongue in your head, you little fool?"

CHAPTER IX.

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

"I must see Miss Guise again," said Esther, as she paused on the first landing. "I had better go in now before I am forbidden, and perhaps there will be no opportunity to-morrow morning; perhaps she may know of some one who wants a servant."

Not waiting for further reflection, Esther knocked gently at the drawing-room door. Florence always knew her knock; it was as much unlike Mrs. Hellicar's pecking little taps as it was different from Biddy's heavy thuds, which seemed to presuppose the inmates of the room in the case of the Seven Sleepers. "Come in," answered Florence's clear, sweet voice. She had left the tea-table, and was sitting on a stool at her father's feet, one hand resting caressingly on his knee, the other holding a letter which had arrived a little while before. How peaceful a scene it was after the wretched tumult in the kitchen!

"Well, Esther, we have not seen you all day; papa is so much better to-night," Florence was beginning, when she caught sight of the girl's woe-stricken, tear-stained face, and sprang up to say, "But what is the matter?—are you ill? Has anybody been unkind to you? Sit down on the sofa."

As Esther sat down she saw Mr. Guise looking at her very intently, and she caught Florence's gaze of tender sympathy; but the next moment their faces grew dim, the gaslights and the fire seemed fast going out, and Miss Guise's voice sounded low and indistinct. She felt sick and cold and stupid, and then she felt nothing more till she awoke, as she imagined, to find Florence bathing her forehead with *eau-de-Cologne*, and Mr. Guise gently rubbing her hands.

"What is the matter?" she cried, starting up, but sinking back again immediately. "How queer I feel. How stupid it is of me. Oh, dear!"

"Hush, my dear," said Mr. Guise, kindly; "do not distress yourself, you are with friends; you will be better directly; you only turned faint. You have been overwrought either in body or mind, I can see. Flossy, I think you might give Miss Kendall a glass of wine now."

Florence brought her a glass of sherry and some biscuits, and insisted on their being taken, and in a few minutes Esther was able to sit up and give an account of herself. She soon made Florence understand that she had come in to wish her good-bye.

"But where are you going?" asked Miss Guise.

"I do not know yet," replied Esther. "I am not to go till morning, and then I thought I would go to a Register-office that I know of; and oh, Miss Guise, if you would say a good word for me—say that I might be *trusted*, you know, and that I am willing to work, and all that. If you would help me to a place it would be as kind a thing as ever you did, and I would bless you for it."

"Do you think, then, of going out as a common servant?" asked Florence, in some surprise.

"What else can I do? I shall only be too thankful if some one will hire me. There is no other way of getting a living open to me. I could not take what is called a genteel situation, for I know nothing. I could not teach, being so ignorant myself; I could not dress-make, for I do not sew well. I might serve in a shop, perhaps. Oh, I will do anything, so that I may live honestly and uprightly, and get my own living. What have I been better than a servant here—a servant without wages? At least I shall earn money, and not be obliged to go in slovenly rags. I don't feel that I shall lower myself by taking a servant's place."

"You will not," said Mr. Guise, quietly. "All labour is honourable, and to do the work that is put into your hands—to do it cheerfully and to the very best of your ability, is *as much working for God* as if you wrote a book that stirred *the hearts of thousands*. 'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to

do, do it with thy might.' As soon as God puts your work into your hands take it up and do it heartily, leaving all issues to Him."

"Do you think God really does care for me?"

"Care for you, my poor child? indeed He does! He who feeds the ravens, and clothes the lilies of the field in their beauty, surely cares for you. He loves you, Esther, and He is waiting for you to give Him all your heart."

"But I am not converted, and God hates sinners."

"Oh, no! that is a mistake; God *loves* sinners. Those who love Him best know that they love Him because He first loved them. Miss Kendall, God in Christ speaks to you *now*! He stands knocking at the door of your heart, that has been closed too long against Him. Will you not let Him in?"

"Look, Esther!" said Florence, and she took down from the wall a beautiful photograph, or engraving, of that well-known picture by Holman Hunt, "The Light of the World." "Look, dear! just so is Christ waiting and watching for you to let Him into your heart! See the patient face, the tender compassion in the deep, sorrowful eyes!"

"And is that really like Christ?"

"It is as like Him in tenderness, and compassion, and love, and longsuffering, as mortal can pourtray. But I am sure the artist must have laid down his pencil with a sense of failure, for no one will know how 'altogether lovely' Christ is till he sees Him face to face. Words cannot speak His perfect praise, and no picture of Him *can* be half so fair as the original. But this, you know, is allegorical; this is the Light of the World, waiting and longing for the door to open, that he may go in and dispel the darkness, and shed light and warmth all through the house."

"What is this written upon the back of the picture?"

Florence read—

"I heard the voice of, Jesus say,
I am this dark world's light;
Look unto Me, thy morn shall rise,
And all thy day be bright.

I looked to Jesus, and I found
In Him my star, my sun ;
And in that light of life I'll walk
Till travelling days are done."

"And all my day be bright!" said Esther to herself, looking again wistfully into the sad, sweet pictured face, noting, too, the long clasped robe and the kingly crown, and the lantern casting on all around its pure soft radiance. "I wish I could hear His voice saying it *to me*, Miss Guise!"

"You do hear His voice; all you have to do is to listen," said Mr. Guise. "Flossy, my love, put away the picture, lest she think more of that than of the real Christ, who is waiting even now to bless her and to give her peace."

"But I have been—well—not what people would call bad, but I have been very proud, very hard, very careless about religion. How can Christ come, or want to come, into my heart?"

"Never mind how or why, only be sure that He does ask to come. Child! how can you resist? How can you be proof against His love, His patience, His wondrous condescension?"

"But I am not converted."

"What do you mean by 'converted,'?"

"I scarcely know; but I have been taught that I am a child of wrath; that nothing I can do will please God; that He is very angry with me. And I thought I must go through some kind of process—some terrible struggle of alternate hope and despair—that must endure for a longer or shorter period, and that I must repent and live a godly life; and in time I should come to know and to feel that I was a Christian. But not such a Christian as aunt Myra! I would rather remain as I am!"

"Never mind aunt Myra, she will have to answer for herself; and it will not suffice you if you plead in excuse that you did not come to Christ because another person failed to come, or only pretended to come. And the process of which you speak some people do pass through; but that is not *conversion*, though it *may* lead to it. Conversion means simply *coming to God*, loving Him, and serving Him for the love

you bear Him. And, Esther, in His service there is great delight. Great peace have they who keep His law, and nothing shall offend them ; and His yoke is easy, and His burden is light. It is so easy to obey when we love ; cannot you understand that ? ”

“ Oh, yes ! I could die, I think, for anyone I loved—for anyone who loved me ! Please don’t think I am making professions ; but I could do a great deal for you, sir, and for Miss Guise, because you are so kind to me ! And I could put myself about a good deal to serve Biddy ; for she in her rough way has been my friend. But how can I get to love Christ ? ”

“ Ask Him to make you love Him ! First go and tell Him all your troubles as you have told us ; tell Him more : tell Him all the secrets of your heart ! ”

“ But He knows them all.”

“ Undoubtedly. And a parent often knows his child’s needs, but he likes the child to come and ask for what he wants, nevertheless. So just pour out your heart before God ; empty it of all its sorrows and fears and perplexities ; say, ‘ Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do ? ’ Then leave all to Him, and an answer of peace will be given.”

“ I will try,” said Esther, softly. “ I think it will be a comfort. And now I must go.”

“ Indeed you will not, till we have settled something for you. Are you sure that you have offended past forgiveness ? ”

“ Pretty sure. Aunt Myra never forgives when once she speaks as she has spoken to me. It was my own fault ; I provoked her. And I think it would be better for me to be out of her reach ; but I shall be very, very sorry to leave you, Miss Guise ; and I am afraid Biddy will not make you comfortable. She is willing, but ill-taught and rough, and she never can remember things. I do hope I may see you again some day.”

And poor Esther’s voice quivered, and a new pang was at her heart ; it was so hard to find friends, only to turn away and leave them.

“ Flossy, my love ! ” And Mr. Guise looked significantly at the letter in his daughter’s hand.

"The very thing, papa!" cried Florence, joyfully. "Only I was afraid to say anything till I had consulted you. I thought of it the moment Esther said she *must* go away. Esther, my cousin Cecil, Miss Uffadyne, who lives in Somersetshire, wants a schoolmistress. Would you like to fill the situation?"

"Oh, Miss Guise, I am not fit! I really know nothing."

"But you would not be wanted at Chilcombe till the middle of January; you would have a month to improve yourself. And you would only have to teach village-girls, and out of school-hours all your time would be your own, and you might learn a great deal, and keep ahead of them very easily. You would have to teach them reading, and writing, and arithmetic, and singing, and sewing, and just the rudiments of geography, and common English history, and that sort of thing."

"If I only could, Miss Guise! But indeed I do not know even the rudiments. I have learnt next to nothing since I was a child. I have got Lizzie's books sometimes, but I had so few opportunities."

"You can learn a great deal in a month—in five weeks, say."

"But I must go to-morrow and get some sort of work."

"To-morrow," said Mr. Guise, "my daughter will take you into her service, and she will pay you wages as she would pay any other maid, and you shall wait upon her. You will have abundance of time to qualify yourself for the situation!"

"Oh! thank you, papa!" cried Florence gratefully. "You darling papa, you always know what I wish, and arrange it for me. But, Esther, you will not mind?"

"*Mind*, Miss Guise?"

"Yes! mind being called my servant; there is no other way that I can see."

"I shall only be too happy, Miss Guise. I shall be proud to say you are my mistress."

"And you shall have the proper books, and I must make *you sew neatly*, and you must have respectable clothes. The *small room* next to mine shall be yours, and you shall sit

there when papa wants me all to himself ! I will write to Miss Uffadyne at once. Now go to bed, Esther, and to-morrow morning dress yourself in your afternoon frock, and come here. Papa, shall you speak to Mrs. Hellicar to-night ? ”

“ It will be best ; or to Mr. Hellicar. I will ring the bell as soon as Esther is fairly upstairs. ”

“ Oh ! if she will not let me stop in the house, ” said Esther, tremblingly.

“ I think she will. Papa will manage her ; he will know how to deal with her. Good night, Esther ! ”

“ Good night, Miss Guise. God bless you ! Now I do believe God loves me, for he has given me friends in my time of sorest need. He has not deserted me in my extremity ! I like to think He sent you here to be kind to me, and to save me from I know not how much misery ! ”

CHAPTER X.

A TRUCE IS AGREED TO.

WHEN it might be fairly presumed that Esther had made good her retreat, Mr. Guise rang the bell, which after some delay was answered by Biddy, who appeared breathless and excited, with a blackened toasting-fork in one hand, and her apron twisted up in the other. When Biddy was perturbed in mind she found great relief in twisting her apron into a rope, and wringing it as if it were just fresh from an ocean of soap-suds. She was proceeding in her own eccentric way to clear the table when Mr. Guise desired her to leave the tea-tray for a while, and go and request Mrs. Hellicar to honour him with five minutes' conversation. Biddy looked up, half comically, half in consternation.

“ Troth, yer honour, but the misthress—the heavens be her bed, an' may she go to glory !—the misthress is took bad intirely. Och ! she's bin in fits this hour an' a half, an' we've given her gin an' peppermint, an' somethin' the master calls *sally-something*, an' we've burnt feathers close under her nose. Don't ye smell 'em, Miss Guise ? It's a powerful

odour they've got with 'em anyhow. An' we've slapped her hands an' pinched her feet, an' dashed the cowld wather in her face; an' she niver came to till I went' an' fetched a thrifle o' holy wather that I had from Father Mulloney, an' I jist sprinkled a drop about her, an' she gave a kick, an' a start, an' a sniff, an' was all right, the saints be blessed; but it's exhausted she is, she sez, an' her poor frame's all shattered. By me troth, an' I wonder it don't fall all to bits, it's bin '*shattered*' so very often. But them high-straiques is dreadful, and puts me in ever sich a conflustration. Och! an' it's a very unlucky day that it's bin, an' it isn't a Friday neither, bad cess to it!"

"Mrs. Hellicar, then, is too unwell for an interview to-night?" inquired Mr. Guise.

"She sez she's mortal bad, yer honour; but I'll carry yer message. Troth, an' she's bin put about; she and Miss Esther have had words, an' Miss Esther's a-going to seek her fortunes; an' she'll be shure to meet with a prince, handsome an' young an' rich, or my name's not Biddy O'Flanigan! It will be jist a fairy tale, as I tells the poor darlint, to comfort her poor heart, that she almost sobbed out ov her with crying last night, an' didn't touch her bread an' cheese, nor take to her beer, till I blarneyed her like."

"What has Miss Esther done?"

"She's done no harm, but a great deal ov good; an' it's a rare jewel that she is, on'y some folk don't know gowld from brass when they see it, an' some folk is that dhramin' that they'd rather see a bit o' broken glass sparklin' in the sunshine than a rare diamont in a dark and dirthy corner. Faix, Miss Guise, an' that's as thrue as the blessid Bible. Yes, Miss Esther's a good girl, an' may she get a good boy of her own, an' ride in her carriage an' six, an' wear a velvet train at Queen Victoria's own Court, for she desarves it, does she, or may I niver spake no more. But ye see, Miss Guise and yer honour, Miss Esther's got a spirit of her own, an' if ye thrample on a crayther continu-ally it'll turn agin an' rend you, as the Gospel sez; and shure Miss Esther's bin thrampled on body *an' sowl mornin', noon, an night*, ever since I came into this *misfortunate house*, where everything goes wrong sither-

mathically, as Father Mulloney do say ; an' it's bad luck they're shure to have, for they throw out their Sunday's cinders on a Monday mornin', an' every knowledgeable body in Oughterard an' Connemara knows that if ye want prosperity an' the good luck ye shouldn't niver throw out yer Sunday's ashes till Tuesday mornin' ; an' ye should always sweep yer floor from the door to the hearth ; and there's Miss Esther will sweep this room on to the landin' ! Remimber yerself ov that, Miss Guise, when yer get a boy ov yer own, an' set up housekeepin' for yerself ; an' there's a wonderful vartue in a red-hot coulter if the butther won't come, an' ass's shoes keeps the crame and the milk from turnin' when it thunders."

"That will do, Biddy," interposed Mr. Guise ; "we will talk more about that another day. It is getting late, and it is important that I should see Mrs. Hellicar to-night, if she is really not too much indisposed. Pray go at once, with Miss Guise's compliments and mine, and I think if she came here, and took a glass of wine before she went to bed, it would not hurt her."

"She'll come ; I'll manage it," said Biddy, confidentially ; "but remimber the gin an' peppermint an' the sally-stuff she's had, an' don't offer her more nor one glass ov wine, an' it had better be a *small* glass, I guess, an' wine an' wather would be safer than wine be itself, I do be thinkin'. I'll go, but be yer lave I'll carry down the kittle, for what's the sinse of goin' down empty-handed ? an' if ye can say a good word for the poor sowl that's cryin' her beautiful eyes out upstairs, the Lord will reward yer for it. But ye must *deluther* the mis-thress a bit. It's ov no mortal use goin' agin her. I often do think that she's possessed with sivin devils, like the sinful woman that Father Mulloney reads about in the holy Gospel ; an' it don't do her one bit ov good goin' to her church. I wish she'd thry the throe church an' the mass. An' the blessid sacrament makes her worse, by this token she's always more evil-like, an' grumbles, an' finds more fault on sacrament Sundays ; but then I tell Miss Esther—axing yer pardon for saying it—it's *not the right sacrament*, an' so, perhaps, it does *do more harm than good*."

"Biddy, *will* you carry my message?" said Mr. Guise, in despair.

"Wid all the playsure in the world," replied the incorrigible Irishwoman; "an' if ye wanted a message carried to Poplar, where I ded use to live in a grocer's family, nineteen ov 'em, countin' lodgers, an' on'y me to fetch, an' carry, an' do, an' the misthress given to drinkin', an' one child a cripple, an' the bisness mighty bad, an' turnin' in next to nothing. Och, now! an' where was I? Faix, an' I'd carry that message there this very night before I slept, though it do rain, and I've holes in my stocking-feet, an' my boots do let the wather in, bad luck to 'em, an' I'm tired in my back that it's like to break if it don't get rested soon."

"I shall be quite contented if you carry my message into the kitchen, or wherever your mistress is; and if you are quick, perhaps Miss Guise may make you a present of a strong new pair of boots. As for Poplar, I was never there, and know none of its inhabitants;" and Mr. Guise politely opened the door, and bowed out Biddy and the kettle, the toasting-fork remaining behind like a trophy. And then Mr. Guise and Florence sat in anxious expectation, for both felt it would be very awkward if something were not settled that night, since Esther's sentence of exile commenced from to-morrow morning, and it was not the right thing under any circumstances to appear to defy Mrs. Hellicar.

Biddy found that lady considerably recovered. She was better, she averred, than she had been for several days, and she and her husband had come to some sort of an understanding, and were exchanging confidences on the subject of Esther.

"You see, my love," Mr. Hellicar was saying, "the world will think hardly of us if we cast off the girl entirely. Now, my dear Myra, character is a great thing; there is nothing in this life like *character*!"

It was a pity that Mr. Hellicar had not come to this conclusion earlier, as it was many a year since he had had any character worth speaking off; and even his wife knew that he was very likely to come to grief some fine day, and *bring disgrace as well as ruin* upon all connected with him. *The commission business was a very corrupting one, she*

thought, and it was only doubtfully genteel. He should have been a great contractor, and made railways in Russia, and then he would have done well, she told herself, and they would have been happy, and she should have continued to adorn society, and Lizzie might have married a real nobleman.

All which Alnaschar-like vision floated before Mrs. Hellicar when her worse half insisted on the importance of "character." But having been soothed by libations of "cream of the valley," administered hot and strong and sweet, and stimulated by drops of sal volatile and dried lavender, taken on sugar, and comforted by the promise of pit tickets for the Holborn Theatre on the night when "The Mysterious Shrieks, or the Murder of the Morena Mountains," was to be performed in full Spanish costume, with new and splendid scenery, by a remarkably talented company, and oysters for supper afterwards, and probably more cream of the valley, though Mr. Hellicar himself preferred "old Tom," or a little smuggled whisky, which always tasted the better for being contraband,—having, I repeat, been thus cheered, and refreshed, and consoled, Mrs. Hellicar was in an unusually good temper, and did not indulge herself in any sarcastic rejoinders, nor reproach her husband for his deficiency in that article which he professed to value so highly, which was highly meritorious on her part, since constantly bringing up past offences, together with recent trespasses, was a habit of Mrs. Hellicar's evidently satisfactory to herself, but exasperating to her unfortunate auditors.

"As to character," she replied, with a mild toss of her head, "*my* character has always been above suspicion, and I've always done my duty by your first wife's niece, Richard; but Esther has stung me like a snake that one warms in one's bosom. She has said the most dreadful things, and I really cannot keep her any longer in my house, tearing my poor nerves, and shattering my already shattered frame, and setting such a bad example to my beloved offspring."

"My dear, the house is mine as well as yours, and the offspring are mine also, if I do not greatly err."

"*Mr. Hellicar, I must beg that you will not interrupt me*

with irrelevant remarks. When a lady marries beneath her rank, *she* is the head of the house and of the family, and is entitled to use personal pronouns in the first person, *singular number*, case varying of course. The man whom, having loved not wisely, but too well, she has honoured with her hand, occupies necessarily a subservient position. I made a *mésalliance*. *I* married beneath myself, therefore I am exempted from the conjugal submission required from women who have matched themselves equally."

"Indeed, but I don't remember any limitation of that sort in St. Paul's writings, my dear," replied Mr. Hellicar, drily.

"St. Paul probably never considered the subject; he was not matrimonially inclined, as you may perhaps remember, as I daresay you read your Bible in your childhood."

"I remember one verse of his, my dear, and I think it contains such sensible advice, that if, in the wise course of Providence, future opportunity should be afforded, I mean to profit by it."

"What verse?" inquired Myra, peevishly, and with a puzzled air. Her husband looked so complacent, that, as she asked the question, she felt as a fly may be supposed to feel when he first enters the spider's parlour; or her sensations might be compared to those of a mouse who knows that if he touches the irresistible morsel, the trap-door will fall, the iron bars will enclose him, and he will be a lost mousie.

Mr. Hellicar cleared his voice, and, looking straight at the warming-pan, replied pithily—

"'Art thou loosed from a wife? Seek not a wife!' 1 Cor. vii, verse uncertain. My dear, I *once* disobeyed the Apostle's injunction: I will never do so again."

At this point of the conversation Biddy happily appeared with Mr. Guise's message, or I am afraid Mrs. Hellicar's amiability would have effervesced at once.

"See Mr. Guise to-night!" she exclaimed—"what on earth for? Surely, they are not going to give notice! I *shall say they took the rooms for six months, and they cannot go till their time is up.*"

"That is all nonsense ! Remember you have Mr. York, of New Square, to deal with."

"I am not in the habit of talking nonsense, Mr. Hellicar. On principle, I refrain my lips from idle words and foolish talking. I wish other people could say the same. However, I think I had better go up—eh, Mr. Hellicar ?"

"To be sure. Go up and see what the row is," said Dick, who had just come in from the place he called "his club," and was standing unperceived in the shadow of the door. "I say, you haven't been at their sherry again ? And how they accounted for two pheasants having one breast between them—or one breast and a quarter, wasn't it ?—I can't imagine !"

Mrs. Hellicar was too much perturbed just then to resent Dick's impertinence, but she put it all down in a certain mental register of other people's sins and trespasses, which she always carried about with her, and to which she referred with terrible accuracy and bitter emphasis as often as occasion furnished. Nothing keeps you so well satisfied with yourself as accurately remembering other people's crimes and peccadilloes ! You have no time to reflect on your own shortcomings, and you naturally learn to ignore them, and then to disbelieve in their very existence, and you sigh and cry over the abominations of the times, and make your moan over your erring friends and relations, happily forgetting that you ever had occasion in your own person to exclaim, "Peccavi." Have a care, though ! Nemesis will come up with you some day, though she lags behind so tardily ; and, in the fulness of time, she will make you wail long and bitterly, and smite upon your breast, while in tears and penitential dust and ashes you cry on your own account, *Mea culpa ! mea culpa !*

Mrs. Hellicar made a hasty toilet—that is to say, she threw a showy Paisley shawl over her soiled dress, and put on all her rings, and a thing all bugles and gilt-dangles that she called a head-dress, and set forth for the front drawing-room. But she turned again at the foot of the stairs.

"Mr. Hellicar, I think you had better come with me ; I am nervous to-night. I feel shattered, and my heart beats !"

"I wish it didn't," muttered Dick, savagely.

Mr. Hellicar was a little surprised, for he was not at all accustomed to be taken into counsel ; but he hastily finished his beer, ran his fingers through his hair, and joined his wife, and the pair went up together, and, arm-in-arm, entered the presence of their lodgers.

"I wish to speak to you concerning Miss Kendall," said Mr. Guise, mildly, but in a tone that somewhat awed Mrs. Hellicar, otherwise she would have shrieked, and indulged in another display of hysteria. Mr. Guise proceeded to say that he was aware of Esther's offence, that she had confessed it with many tears, and that he understood it was arranged for her to leave Queen Square on the following day.

Mrs. Hellicar bowed her head, with what she considered a very dignified motion ; and Mr. Guise resumed—

"But what is to become of the poor girl? She tells me she has no friends."

"She must go to service! Sir, you do not know what a trial Esther has been to me. She has opposed me ever since she came here, a little sullen thing who would not speak to any of us. I have borne much from her, and my poor shattered frame can bear no more. I have not long to be here. My sands are fast running out, and I wish to live the remainder of my brief days in peace and quietness."

"I am sure I don't know who will see to things!" put in Mr. Hellicar. "Biddy is but a broken crutch at the best of times, and you couldn't rely upon her to cook a chop or boil a potato decently. The last girl we had was quiet and clever, and served up a plain dinner excellently ; but then she drank, and robbed us, and got out of the house after we were in bed."

Mrs. Hellicar frowned majestically on her talkative lord, and he at once felt himself suppressed ; but she had somehow forgotten that Biddy was very tiresome and inefficient, and that Esther, in spite of all the charges brought against her, did manage to get through a great deal of work, and attended to all the cooking, and waited herself upon the *drawing-rooms*. Her absence *might* be felt in the house, and Mrs. Hellicar was rather scared at the idea of being left

to her own resources. However, it would not do to retract now ; there was nothing like sticking to one's word.

"I quite agree with you that she had better give up her position in your family," said Mr. Guise, still in the same mild, firm tone which provoked the mistress of the house, while it quenched her spirit, and made her unnaturally meek. "And, learning that she was dismissed from your service—you must forgive me if I use the wrong term in speaking of your relation—I bethought myself of a situation which would probably suit her, and it only rests with my daughter and myself to recommend her, to insure her being engaged immediately."

"Mr. Guise," said Mrs. Hellicar, trembling with anger, and trying to be calm, "I ask you how you can, as a Christian gentleman, recommend a young person who has conducted herself so iniquitously, so shamefully, so ungratefully?"

"Have you anything to state against her character?"

"A thousand things."

"Three or four things will suffice—one thing will suffice : is she unsteady, immodest?"

"That she's *not*!" said Mr. Hellicar with heat. "The Kendalls never misconducted themselves. Every woman of them was better than rubies, and Esther is a true Kendall, and no young lady could be better conducted. I should like to see the young fellow that would take a liberty with the girl! I hope I may be able to say the same of my own daughter four or five years hence."

"And *I* hope, Mr. Hellicar, you are not comparing *my* Lizzie with Esther Kendall, a girl without any manners, and perfectly uneducated!"

"I think the less said about that the better. I am afraid her ignorance is pretty much our fault, wife!"

"It's no one's fault but her own, and I am ashamed of you, Mr. Hellicar! If you thought so much of Esther, why did you not send her to boarding-school, and make a lady of her? *Our* fault, indeed! Ah, one never knows what one will come to when one *marries*! Take warning, Miss Guise, *and look up rather than down* when you think of changing

your name ! I looked *down*, when I might have looked *up*, and I have paid for my folly ever since."

Florence felt quite sorry for Mr. Hellicar. She thought it must be so painful to him to sit by and listen to his wife's unwifely remarks ; but Mr. Guise hastened to resume the conversation for which he had requested Mrs. Hellicar's company. He was rather tired of listening to so much nonsense. Biddy and her mistress were quite too much for him, though he infinitely preferred the maid to the mistress.

"It is growing late," he said ; "let us return to business. If I understand you aright, Mrs. Hellicar, Esther Kendall's chief faults are those of temper?"

"She is fiery, and sullen, and very obstinate. She does not mind what she says when she is in a temper. I am sure she talked to me as if I were an unregenerate person ! And then, her black ingratitude !"

"But she is truthful, Mrs. Hellicar ? And your husband declares that she is maidenly. I myself think she has a very nice sense of propriety. I think, too, her mind is of a superior order, and will repay cultivation ; at any rate we are going to try. Every young person should have a chance. You must allow, my dear madam, that she ought to have a chance. Even criminals should be allowed their chances now and again ; how much more a pure young girl, untaught and orphaned, who has had hitherto but few advantages ! Besides, she wishes to be independent ; she does not want to be a burden on any one, and I commend her. You have intimated that you have long wished her removal."

Mrs. Hellicar had done so much more than "intimate" that she could not contradict Mr. Guise's assertion. She began to be afraid she had gone a little too far, considering that she was both a fashionable lady, bred in high society, and a Low-Church Christian woman with high pretensions to superior piety ! She was a little ashamed, too, of the impromptu beating Esther had sustained at her hands, and she fancied the Guises knew all about it—which they did not, *Esther having wisely kept her own counsel on that humiliating episode of her story*, though the marks of her aunt's thin,

wiry fingers were upon her face. Mrs. Hellicar simply bowed her head in assent. She began to wish that she had forgiven Esther, and told her that she might stop and go on as usual. The idea of Esther appealing to the Guises had never occurred to her.

Mr. Guise resumed: "My niece, Miss Uffadyne, is now looking out for a village schoolmistress. I propose that Miss Kendall shall go down to Chilcombe, and try for six months whether the situation suit her, and also whether she suit the situation. The school is in excellent working order, and Miss Uffadyne, who is a very good and energetic person, and very kind as well, superintends it herself, and takes some of the higher classes; and the girls are of a good sort, take them one with another, and not too many of them."

"Esther a schoolmistress! You do amuse me, Mr. Guise, indeed you do!" and Mrs. Hellicar giggled, and felt really hysterical; she was quite as ready to cry as to laugh. "She knows nothing; she can just read and write her name."

"She is very anxious to improve herself, and I know that will just suit Miss Uffadyne. She will delight in superintending Esther's studies after school-hours. I know she will prefer Esther with her earnestness and determination to learn, to a more competent person. Besides, she will not be wanted till quite the middle of January; and, in the meantime, my daughter will give her some lessons."

"I cannot have her here," replied Mrs. Hellicar, sharply; "her impudence will pass all bounds with the prospect of bettering herself before her eyes. Besides, if she did stop, she would have no time for lessons; even my own Lizzie I make quite useful in the holidays."

"I do not wish her to remain here as a member of your family, but of mine. You know I spoke to you about a maid for my daughter some days ago. She has been accustomed to personal attendance, and will be glad to be suited so easily and at once. I have engaged Miss Esther to be Miss Guise's maid till the Chilcombe school re-opens after Christmas. She will be entirely in these apartments, and need not mix with your own household any more than we do."

Mr. Hellicar gave a great sigh of relief. Weak and

unprincipled as he was—and I believe his lack of principle was chiefly born of his lack of moral strength—I must do him the justice to say, that Esther's unseemly position in his family had long weighed upon his mind, and tormented him in his conscience, if a conscience he could be said still to possess; and he was really concerned about her at present, and very glad to think she had fallen into good and capable hands. Not so Mrs. Hellicar; she could not bear the idea of Esther in the house, no longer subject to her authority, no longer to be driven, and taunted, and oppressed—no more to be her slave and bondwoman; and she declared that she could not go from her word; she had passed her word, and she could not commit the sin of going from it, and Esther must go!

"I am sorry," replied Mr. Guise, with mild dignity, "because, in that case, *we* shall have to go. I, too, have passed my word to my daughter, to myself, and I think also to my God; and I must protect Esther, and give her the chance which is her right—her *right*, I say, Mrs. Hellicar. Since, then, you are determined, Miss Guise and I will remove ourselves to-morrow: it will be inconvenient, but duty is duty."

This was more than Mrs. Hellicar had bargained for. The Guises paid well, and gave far less trouble than the average of her lodgers. Also, they spent a good deal of money, and did not care what became of cold meats, nor scrutinise the weekly bills too closely. "They paid royally," Mrs. Hellicar had affirmed. Her husband thought they paid *nearly* "up to his mind." Dick coarsely declared they "paid through the nose," and he took his little commissions out of them now and then, and would have taken more, but for Esther's vigilance, and for a certain influence over him which she possessed and exercised. No! it would never do to part with the Guises yet! and Mr. Hellicar conveniently interfering, Myra made a show of submitting to marital authority, and after the proper amount of plaintive remonstrance and pitiful reproach, because her own feelings were *disregarded*, and her decision set at naught, she yielded *under protest*, and a truce of war was concluded. Esther

was Mr. Guise's hired servant, but she was to give Biddy now and then some light assistance, and she was to go away at the time appointed to her situation in Somersetshire. And so the struggle ended, and Mr. and Mrs. Hellicar drank a glass of Mr. Guise's fine port, and wished "Good night" politely, and retired shortly after to the privacy of their own sleeping quarters, the husband feeling altogether satisfied and relieved, the wife feeling in her heart that things might have turned out worse, though she herself, for the first time since she became Myra Hellicar, found herself signally defeated.

CHAPTER XI.

BIDDY THROWS THE OLD SHOE.

GREAT was the astonishment of Biddy and the juvenile Hellicars when they discovered that Esther had quitted both kitchen and garret, and gone to reside on the first floor ; and great was the consternation of Mrs. Warburton when fearfully and wonderfully cooked dinners and suppers made their appearance at her table, and when, desiring that Miss Kendall might be sent to her for expostulation and just reprimand, she was triumphantly informed by Biddy that Miss Kendall lived now with Mr. and Miss Guise, and was a great deal too busy with her "book-larin' and her purty sewin'" to trouble herself about pots and frying-pans ; for she was going out as governess after the holidays, and would never come back to Queen Square any more, unless she came back in her carriage and pair to return good for evil.

As for Lizzie Hellicar, she was more annoyed than any one at Esther's advancement. It had always been her pleasure to treat her cousin as vastly her inferior ; and that any good fortune should accrue to her was exasperating in the extreme. Esther had been humiliated all her life ; humiliation was her portion, she was born to it and bred to it—so to speak, she ate and drank it, and lived in an atmosphere of *humiliation*, till it became a part of her *existence* ; and, such is the force of habit, there were times

when she grew almost reconciled to her lot, and, but for her peculiar temperament, would certainly have contented herself in her weary thralldom, had it only been a little less oppressive.

And now, as it seemed to Lizzie, the days of her humiliation were accomplished, and Esther was to be considered, and made much of, and petted, and advanced in life—"and, but that she is so very ugly, ma'," said the young lady, confidentially, "I shouldn't wonder if she married a gentleman. She'll get into society, see if she doesn't!"

Miss Lizzie had caught her mother's jargon about "society," her notions, however, being of the vaguest as to what society really meant. It was a certain circle, she believed, in which lords and ladies lived and moved, in which her "ma' had once moved before she disgraced herself by marrying pa' ;" in which Mrs. Shanks, for all her *moires*, and laces, and real garnets, had never moved, and never would move so long as the world should stand. It was a gloried existence of balls, and parties, and picnics, and rides in Rotten Row, and drives in the ring, and theatres, and operas, and fine dresses, and feathers and flowers, and nothing in the world to do save to enjoy one's self ; to dress and flirt, and get married presently, and afterwards give splendid entertainments on one's own account. Where "society" begins and where it ends has puzzled wiser heads than Miss Hellicar's ; but about this time her mind was much exercised respecting the Coffnomores in Southampton Row. Were chemists and druggists in society, or were they not ? The question was of moment, for Master Isaac Coffnomore, aged fifteen, who was heir to his father's trade in simples and poisons, had declared himself to be Miss Hellicar's devoted admirer ; and Lizzie considered herself engaged, clandestinely of course, and was very much in love according to her own account ; only she would like to be certified of the exact rank which chemists and druggists take in the world of fashion before she irrevocably pledged herself.

Esther's withdrawal fell heavy on Lizzie, for she had to *wash and dress* the little ones, and to sit by Tommy in the

attic at nights till it pleased him to go to sleep ; and as no one dreamed of a fire being lighted in those regions, though the ice on the Serpentine bore, and the pumps and the fountains were fast frozen up, Lizzie strongly objected to the shivering process to which the ill-training of her little brother subjected her, and she vehemently desired Esther's return to her discarded duties.

It was found, after a short trial, that Biddy was really more incompetent than had been supposed ; nobody got anything to eat, and nobody could be attended to, and both Mrs. Warburton and Mr. Macgregor gave notice. Mrs. Hellicar was in despair ; it would never do to let her sources of income trickle away into alien channels. At the same time, it was quite out of the question that she should exert herself ; her shattered frame and her nerves forbade the mere idea, and then—"brought up as she had been, and with her claims"—it was not to be thought of ; and Mr. Hellicar, when he wished that she would bestir herself, if it were only to *see* to things, was a brute, expecting from his lady-wife all that had come naturally enough from the wife who had really been, so Myra said, "a woman of the people." So another servant was engaged, a smart Londoner, who despised Biddy, and tyrannised over Mr. Hellicar. She was a young woman with a sharp tongue and a fluent command of the English language when she was displeased, a state of things perpetually recurring ; and she kept even her mistress in some degree of awe, and turned round upon Lizzie, and threatened to shake the life out of her the first time that young lady favoured her with a pert rejoinder. But she cooked tolerably, though she "struck" before the first week was over, refusing to dress another dinner till the proper culinary utensils should be forthcoming ; and Mr. Hellicar was actually forced to go to the ironmonger's, and buy and *pay* for necessary articles for which it was impossible to get credit.

Meanwhile Esther was extremely happy. She insisted on waiting upon the Guises entirely, and she conciliated the irate Priscilla *so far as to be allowed to give some attention to the meals.* But when all her duties were scrupulously

performed, much time remained for the studies for which she had so longed, and which were now assuming so much importance. Florence found that Esther in one way or another knew a great deal—that is, she had contrived, by dint of eager painstaking, to pick up no small amount of information of divers kinds; but being of necessity quite incapable of arranging it in any way, her little heap of knowledge was like a dissected puzzle in the hands of a child, no two pieces fitting into each other, unless by merest chance.

But now she began to work upon a system, and she was docile as a little child. She was content to go back to the beginning, to take up the lowest rudiments, and she worked addition sums, and wrote text-hand copies, and read “Little Arthur’s History of England,” with all the zeal imaginable. But, bringing to these exercises earnestness and industry, and the mind and thought of a woman, she progressed rapidly, and she began to understand the basis of many points of education, and to perceive how one fact elicited another, and how reason developed reason, and how events resulted in consequences that, being traced to their issues, changed the whole aspect of a people’s history! She learned so fast, after the first fortnight, that even Mr. Guise was surprised, and rejoiced to think that capacities so truly excellent should be brought into play at last.

Neither had Florence any idea till now how thoroughly Esther could be her companion, and at one time she asked her father if she might not keep Esther with her a few months longer, and fit her for a higher situation than that of village schoolmistress.

But Mr. Guise replied, “No, Flossy. Having taken Esther with a definite intention, it will be wise to carry it out. We must not do too much for her.”

“Oh, papa, darling! that is not like you.”

“I mean for her own sake, my dear. It is no true kindness to give too much help in cases like Esther’s. She was placed in a position where she could not help herself; she *needed aid*, and God sent it to her by us; we were the *instruments of His will*, for the time was come that the

materials of progress should be put into her hands. She can never again be what she was when first we knew her. Her mind is enlarged ; she has learned to think accurately, to discriminate, to arrange the facts she has gathered together. She has a power now she never had before : she must use it. She will respect herself more in days to come if she can remember that she always earned her own living and gained her education—I should rather say her scholarship—by dint of toil and trouble and patient perseverance. What one acquires lightly, one values lightly ; what costs one pains and labour is always deemed well worthy of estimation. No ! we must not keep her now. We have given her an opportunity ; we have placed tools in her hands ; we have found her work : it will be for her own good, for her soul's health, to go and do it. God has given her a noble independence of character ; let us not by any mismanagement of ours detract from the value of such a gift."

"I suppose you are right, papa ; but she is so lady-like, she seems fitted for something better than a village schoolmistress's life. And though Cecil is very kind and right-minded, you know I always thought her rather hard, and a little overbearing. I should not like to be under her."

"To answer your first objection, I think the life of a village schoolmistress, if she be qualified for her task, and do her duty thoroughly and lovingly, is superior to that of an ordinary governess in a family. The schoolmistress knows her standing, the governess never does ; if accepted as a lady in one situation, she may be treated as an upper servant in the next ; the schoolmistress, who has more liberty and who occupies no debateable position, has the best of it, I think. But if, indeed, Esther is fitted for a position of more importance, she will come to it some day ; she has her foot on the ladder now, let her take one round of it at a time. By steady advance of her own she is far more likely to attain a permanent elevation, than if we lifted her at once to an airy pinnacle, which might make her dizzy, and lead, perhaps, to a humiliating downfall."

And so Mr. Guise's calm sense tempered Florence's girlish enthusiasm, but the wise policy of the father and the warm

impulsiveness of the daughter equally befriended Esther. Bereft of either she would not have prospered half so well. And so the happy Christmas-tide passed away, and the new year came in full of hope and promise ; and it was time to see about Esther's outfit for Chilcombe, and she and Florence were very busy with the modest wardrobe that seemed to its young possessor a most complete and magnificent providing. Florence knew that Cecil would object to any approach to finery, that anything like pretension in Esther's appearance would at once win her new patroness's disfavour ; for Cecil had instituted certain sumptuary laws, which were binding upon all who came under her influence, and that it was so Florence was perfectly aware. Neither did her own taste lead her to bedizen Esther even in the least degree, so when her trunk was packed for Chilcombe it contained only three dresses, a plain, substantial grey winsey, a grey French merino for Sundays, and a neatly-made black silk for grand occasions. A tweed cloak, a brown straw hat, and a pretty but simple bonnet, completed the outfit, all other necessary garments included. Mr. Guise's presents were a nice warm plaid shawl, a stout alpaca umbrella, and a beautiful Bible, with marginal references and maps. It came to the last night, and with tearful eyes Esther sat listening to words of cheer and counsel from both her friends. She, too, would fain have lingered, but she knew it was best that she should go ; and she was trying to keep up her courage, and almost wishing the parting were over, so keen was the pain of it in anticipation.

"Even loving has its drawbacks, I see," she said to Florence, when for the last time she had carried down the tea-things, and was sitting quietly before the fire, longing yet scarcely knowing how to express some of the thoughts that were occupying her mind.

"Nothing is perfect here," replied Mr. Guise, smiling. He quite understood Esther's little speech ; "and yet," he continued, "we have so many rich blessings. God is so good to us that even the saddest among us has cause for thanksgiving. *We must take things as we find them, Esther.*"

"*I do not quite understand, sir.*"

"I do not mean that we must not try, according to the talent which God has given us, to make bad good, and better best. I mean that we must not be dissatisfied with that which is given to our keeping—given us in the providence of God. If we have a currant-bush, let us not grumble because it is not a vine, but let us cultivate and make the very best of what we have."

"The inequality of God's gifts has always puzzled me," said Esther: "more in past days than now; for then it seemed to me that some people had all they wanted, and more than they wanted, and I nothing."

"You had discipline, my child."

"I did not think of that; and I suppose I needed it. I did not wish for it."

"Happily it comes unwished for, or to many it would never come at all. God gives us what we want, not what we wish; but if we take His will as ours, and meekly bow our heads to the chastening He sends, we shall find by-and-by that what we have is what we wish."

"And it is best to have one's discipline at first?"

"It is best whenever it comes; but I know what you mean—we all like best to have a grey morning that brightens gradually into a golden noon and a mellow afternoon, and fades at last into a cloudless eventide."

"But some people's lives seem all grey, some all gold!"

"We cannot tell: we cannot judge for others. We never know how much those we envy have to suffer; we cannot tell what corroding cares are at their hearts; for there are pains and griefs that never can be spoken, save to God. Blessed be His holy name, we may always speak to Him! But, Esther, we ourselves give very much the colouring to our own lives."

"How?"

"By the spirit we nurture in our inner selves. Ah! my child, when the skies are grey above us, and the earth grey around us, we may have God's sunshine in our hearts, if we will. Trust Him in every *little thing*, Esther; hold fast to His promises, and your life will never again be all grey."

"*Will it ever be all gold?*"

“Probably not ; the grey and the gold intermingle generally to the end—till we reach the Golden City. My dear, try to make other people’s lives golden ; it is more blessed to give than to receive. And there are other gifts than alms ; and in giving, one receives back into one’s own bosom a hundredfold.

“ ‘Lowly hearts that lean on THEE
Are happy everywhere !’

Remember that the *lowly heart* is happy, and the helpful spirit rejoices. Don’t think too much of your own happiness ; only strive to be a true Christian, and *always hope and trust.*”

Next morning Esther went away from Queen Square. Her uncle kissed her, and muttered some sort of a blessing, as if he were ashamed of it. Dick would have kissed her, too ; but he had to be content with shaking hands, and wishing her all prosperity. Mrs. Hellicar was gracious for her ; and Lizzie was nowhere to be seen. The Guises commended her to God ; she was to write to them whenever she had time. Biddy flung one of her old shoes over the cab for luck, and then went up into the garret and cried long and bitterly.

CHAPTER XII.

FOR GOOD OR FOR ILL?

“WHERE is the dog-cart going ?” asked Mr. Uffadyne, as he met his sister in the hall.

“To the station, to meet the new schoolmistress ; I expect her by the 7.15 train.”

“Who is she, and what is she, and does she come here ?”

“How you forget, Oswald. She is a *protégée* of my uncle, and of Florence, too. I do not much fancy *protégées* ; they are nearly always upstarts, and given to over-estimation of their abilities and their claims ; but if she has any nonsense in her, I shall soon take it out of her ! Florence answers for her principles, and that is the chief thing ; but Florence is *not very wise.*”

“Considering that Florence is my betrothed, you are

exceedingly polite, Cecil. However, she is wise enough for me."

"She is too wise for you, Oswald."

"You are more and more complimentary, Cecil."

"I never attempt to pay compliments ; I despise them too much. I like the sober truth, whether it be sweet or bitter."

"You would not like it so well if the bitter truth came to be your own portion. Have a care, Cecil : people may find it their duty to speak plainly to you some day, and I can promise you that it will not be agreeable."

"I trust 'people' may always do their duty by me ; a rough friend is better than a smooth enemy. As to things being agreeable and disagreeable, it is of small consequence in the end ; no one likes medicine, but everybody, except little children, knows that medicine must be taken at proper times."

"Your simile is faulty, Cecil, my dear. The homœopaths give sugar-plums, or what seems to be pure water, at the most with a *soupcçon* of brandy in it. And just because there is nothing in homœopathy to provoke a wry face, or to torture your inner man, I believe you set yourself against it."

"You are very absurd, Oswald. I refuse to pin my faith upon this new system of medicine simply because I cannot see the sense of it. The maxim of these homœopathists, '*similia similibus curantur*,' seems to be purely nonsensical."

"Well, I will not dispute with you, well knowing that any one who disputes with you is sure to get the worst of it ; at any rate you will have the last word, and I think these frequent contentions do not tend to that state of amity in which brethren ought to dwell. I believe a senior wrangler would have small chance in an argument with you ; you ought to belong to a debating society, Cecil."

Cecil laughed good-humouredly.

"I know I care nothing about senior wranglers, and"—she smiled wickedly—"fellows of colleges ; it seems to me that they seldom come to any good."

"Do you mean morally ? In the statistics of crime do you find a majority of fellows sentenced to penal servitude, or hanged at the Old Bailey ?"

"*Morally* they do well enough, no doubt. I meant socially,

of course. What, as a set of men, do fellows of colleges ever do for the world, for their day and generation? You might have done well but for two things, your Fellowship and your engagement to Florence. But we are talking of Fellowships and fellows: these are times when a man should make his mark in the world, and he does *not* make it by droning away his life in Oxford or Cambridge, perhaps cramming other unlucky wights, who, when they have learned the names of many things, and know all about the amours of Jupiter and Mars, and the tactics of Agamemnon, imagine that they are wonderfully learned. They get knowledge, I grant; heaps and heaps of it. A fellow of a college, I suppose, piles Pelion on Ossa when he accumulates facts; but as one far wiser than I said the other day, 'it is a knowledge that requires no experience and very little thought, but it demands much memory, and when they have loaded themselves in this way they think they are instructed in all things. After all, what can they do that is of real use to mankind? What can they *create*?' The man who said this, Oswald, knows the world, and it is in the world that we are to live. I think it is a great misfortune when a young fellow of four or five and twenty gains a Fellowship."

"Whew! you may say that, but no one will believe you; there *are* advantages."

"Some one will believe me, for I speak the thoughts of some of the first men of the age; and though they be Oxford men or Cantabs by nurture, they have not spent their lives in the semi-cloister of an university, drivelling away their existence over quantities of Latin and Greek particles and unheard-of logarithms, settling, perhaps, the pattern of Ulysses' dinner-service, or the material of which Penelope's under-petticoat was made,—or chopping logic till they make mince-meat of common sense, and wake up some fine morning to find themselves fools! Understand, I value scholarship, but scholarship is only a means to an end. Man no more lives to learn book-learning than he lives to eat. He must eat if he would not die; he must study if he would not find *himself hors de combat* in all the great arenas of life. But we *know what he will be called* if he is always eating, and also

what reputation he will acquire in these busy, thorough-going days if he be always grubbing in ancient times, and drying himself up in the mummy-like, desiccating atmosphere of dead languages. Let him grub ; let him read himself blind ; let him pore over the dead and buried literature of Nimrod and his times, if they had a literature, which really I don't know, being only a woman ; let him be 'double-first' seven times over, and senior wrangler to boot, only that cannot be, and fellow of a dozen colleges, only that cannot be either ; but let him be so crammed with learning that he is entitled to all these honours and *advantages*, and then—*cui bono ?* ”

“At any rate, a man is provided for when he gets a Fellowship.”

“Fie upon you, Oswald ! And it is not even certain that he does not humiliate himself by being so provided for—that is, for life. Fellowships are excellent things for the young, nice go-carts for the infant intellectuals while they are feeling their way in the world ; but they are a shame to a middle-aged man, and a disgrace to an old one. God never meant a man to heap up learning and shut himself up in his college for life, any more than he meant him to heap up riches, and hide them in a vault among dead men's bones and the corruption of past ages. What would you say to a working man who spent forty or fifty years in collecting fine bricks, well-quarried stones, marble shafts, and planks of oak and cedar, all the *material* for building a glorious temple, yet contented himself with ceaselessly turning over his stores, and adding to them, but never putting them to their proper use—going on, indeed, amassing his so-called treasure till there was enough for a hundred temples, yet never building one ? ”

“I should say he was insane.”

“And just as insane are these University grubbers, who spend a whole life in conning learned trifles and toiling over their heaps of solemn rubbish.”

“The rubbish, as you call it, gets used.”

“Yes, thank God ! To the monkish fellows who live in colleges we may say—

“ ‘Ye build, ye build, but ye enter not in,
Like the tribes whom the desert devoured for sin.’

The coral worm toils and toils, and behold at last a new and beauteous country, and men enter in and dwell there and possess the land ; but who would be the coral worm ? Who cares for him, save as we like to know his natural history ? Silkworms are useful creatures, but who ever envied the silkworm ? Moles, I am told, have their mission ; but who ever wanted to be a mole ? You are laughing, Oswald ! ”

“ And well I may ! I am laughing at your vehemence, Cecil, not at your remarks ; for though, woman-like, you talk exaggeratedly, there is sense in what you say. Much of what you say is absolute truth, and has fallen before from wiser lips than yours—ay, and it will fall again and again, till men will be compelled to listen and to bestir themselves, till the second Reformation dawns upon the land. But I am glad, Cecil, that I gained my Fellowship : it proved that I had certain powers, though not of the highest kind ; it was a certain goal which it did me good to reach ; it gave my early manhood an aim, and that it is always good to have, provided it be a lawful and lofty aim. And I contend that a Fellowship is a lofty aim for a lad under five-and-twenty : after thirty, the less a fellow says about his Fellowship the better.”

“ Oh, Oswald ! I do so want you to be a truly great man.”

“ I fear, Cis, I have not the making of a great man in me.”

“ You have ! you have ! only I feared that, being fellow of your college, you would think the race was run, and never take your place in the world ; for it is in the world you must leave your foot-prints, not in the cloister. Still more I fear that, marrying Florence, you will settle down into a tame country squire, and content yourself with mammoth turnips and wonderful crops of wheat. Oh ! if you had no prospects, how glad I should be ! ”

“ You are kind.”

“ I am—truly kind ! And it is because I recognise what is really in you that I desire for you such a career as may make men bless your name and reverence your memory. I often wish I had had to work my own way up ; it is not *good to be born to a competency* : it tends to sloth. Surely *I heard wheels !* ”

"I dare say, we have talked so long; and you have never answered all the questions I asked you. What is this girl, and is she coming here?"

"She is coming here to-night; but she will live at the Slade Farm. Mrs. King is a nice motherly woman. As to what this Esther Kendall is, I hardly know. I wonder if she is related to the Kendalls of Elsworthy!—not likely, though. My uncle seems to have rescued her from much oppression, and from very unprincipled relatives. I hope she will repay his kindness. Florence thinks very highly of her, of her character, her disposition, her talents; but Florence is always ready to think the very best of anyone, and I shall be on my guard."

"One word, Cecil. I do not often offer advice, but have a care how you start with this young person; do not at once discourage her, and prejudice her against you; do not show her your hard side, for I have noticed that while it frightens some people, it embitters others, and I think it estranges all. You are very wise, I know, my dear; but wisdom may as well wear a velvet glove over her steel gauntlet. Steel is hard and cold too."

At this moment Esther stood in the doorway, outwardly quite composed, but inwardly sinking at the heart. Cecil shook hands with her, but did not introduce her to Oswald; that, of course, was unnecessary. Then she led her to the breakfast-room, where tea was prepared for her. She stayed a little while, talking about the journey, and inquiring after Mr. Guise and Florence, remembering all the while Oswald's counsel, and being as kind and gentle in her manner as it was possible for Cecil Uffadyne to be. Then she left her, saying they would have their talk in the morning—she would send Smith, her own maid, and Smith would attend to her, and show her to her bedroom.

"Well?" said Oswald, as Cecil stood thoughtfully on the hearthrug.

"I like her. She is sincere, but terribly abrupt in her tone. I fancy she has a temper of her own—there is a great deal of character in her face."

"She is excessively plain."

"I do not want a pretty governess ; the last I had caused me great anxiety ; but she has beautiful eyes. I feel as if she would be no neutral person among us ; she has come, I am sure, either for great good or for great evil."

"One of your presentiments ?"

"Yes ; I cannot help them. I wish I could."

"May Miss Kendall's coming, then, be for' unmitigated good. But I never saw a worse complexion."

"What does that matter ? I fancy—yes, I fancy, I feel that she *has come for good.*"

CHAPTER XIII.

ESTHER MAKES AN ENEMY.

MISS SMITH, upon the direction of her mistress, did condescend to attend upon Esther, intending to escort her to the room prepared for her ; but a very great condescension she esteemed it, inasmuch as she had engaged herself to wait upon ladies only, and by no means to attend upon village schoolmistresses. She had not seen the "young person" on her arrival, and she was prepared for any amount of assurance and self-assertion—schoolmistresses of all grades being creatures towards whom she cherished a decided and unreasonable antipathy, and concerning whom, as she distinctly affirmed, she always had her suspicions. "For you see, Mrs. Lees," she said to the rector's housekeeper, "governesses is neither here nor there ; they are not fish, nor flesh, nor yet fowl. They are servants, only they never know their places, and will never undertake anything menial if they can help it, and they have everything to gain and nothing to lose."

"I should have thought they had their characters to lose," replied Mrs. Lees, who was also in antagonism to the governess-race, but compelled from conscientious scruples to qualify the sweeping assertions of her friend. There was a governess at the Rectory, of whom she stood in whole-some awe, and whom she also cordially disliked, and at the

same time respected ; Miss Morrison being the one person in the house whom she could not circumvent. "I should think," she continued, "their characters were everything to them, for a governess without a character is no better off than a housemaid. She can't get any sort of place that is worth having, you know."

"They call their places *situations*," replied Miss Smith with acrimony, "and they never say a word about characters, it is all *testimonials*, which are easily forged of course, and 'references exchanged,' and they have a salary instead of honest wages. Oh, if they do lose one reference, they manage somehow to get another ; they make out they have been ill-treated, and people take their part. It's the fashion now-a-days to stick up for governesses and dressmakers ; not but what the latter has their grievances, as I can testify, having served an apprenticeship when I was a young girl, and I worked my flesh off my bones, and when I had learnt my business I fell ill, and the doctor told me that if I went on dressmaking I should be a corpse in six months. So, having a natural aversion to corpses, especially to being one myself, I gave in, and took to genteel service. But I just meant to observe that governesses are extremely designing ; they are given to make dreadful mischief in families, and if I was a parent, I would never let such a creature come into my house—leastways, not live in it. 'If you must have a governess, ma'am,' says I to my late lady, 'do, for heaven's sake, have a *daily* ; the danger wouldn't be half so much.' 'And what danger is there?' said she. But I shook my head, seeing by her light manner she wouldn't be warned. And I was right ; if that governess that came into the house didn't go and win the children's affections, to say nothing of their papa's, so that when my poor lady died, which she did in less than a year, the governess was kept on, and managed everything, and in little more than a twelvemonth married the master, and gave the poor innocent children a step-mother. Of course, I left ; I was not going to serve a lady that wasn't a lady."

"That's what it will come to at the Rectory," said Mrs. Lees, with a groan. "But dear me, who is that

a-ringing? Isn't it the breakfast-room bell?—but it can't be."

"It is, though. I never did! That hussy is actually ringing the bell. There, now!"

"What will you do?"

"I will let Nancy answer it, and then I will go in, and I'll soon show her where she ought to be. I always managed that Miss Martingale, and this one is a mere chit, who has never been out before."

"Well, I must be going home; I only came in just to ask about that spiced beef master had here at luncheon the other day. Good bye, Miss Smith; I wish you joy of the new governess. You'll see that cook sends me up the right recipe?"

Then Smith adjusted her cap and cuffs, and prepared to address herself to the task of crushing on the spot the adventurous young woman who had presumed to ring the bell. The truth was, Esther herself had regarded the act as altogether adventurous; but she was very tired, and longing to be in bed, and in spite of Miss Uffadyne's assurance the promised maid and convoy did not appear; and the young lady had said on leaving the room, "If you want anything, Miss Kendall, ring." So after patiently waiting till she felt herself falling into a dose, Esther did ring, timidly enough, and was called a "hussy" for her pains.

Nancy, having obeyed Miss Smith's behests, returned to say that the young person was extremely tired, and would be so very glad if she might be shown her bedroom; adding, in a deprecating tone, lest it should please her high and mightiness the lady's-maid to be offended, "she don't seem at all uppish; she spoke quite meek-like, and as if she hadn't much spirit in her."

"She might have waited," was all Smith's comment; and then she proceeded to the encounter.

The lamp was burning dimly, and the fire was low; and Smith, as she quietly opened the door, had a momentary view of the young figure lying wearily back in the easy-chair, her *head bent as if in deep meditation*, her hands lying listlessly *in her lap*.

The next minute the scene was changed ; Esther knew some one was intently regarding her, some one with unkindly eyes and rather scornful air, and she changed her position, sitting upright, and acknowledging, without rising, the presence of the new comer.

“You are the new schoolmistress?” said Smith, eyeing Esther sternly from head to foot.

Esther admitted that she came to Chilcombe in that capacity, and Smith immediately answered—

“You’ll never do, I see ; you are quite a child, and you don’t know what the work is.”

Esther’s heart sank within her. When one is nervous, and very tired, and doubtful of one’s capabilities, one is easily cowed by an adverse criticism ; there are states of mind when the burden of the grasshopper is more than can be borne, and there are times when a camel’s load can be sustained with bravery and cheerful patience, and a strong indomitable hope that all will turn out well in the end. But the faith and patience of the morning and of the eventide are often quite very different affairs ; we are but poor creatures, and the material influences the spiritual, strive as we will against it.

Esther looked wistfully into the severe, unfriendly face that presented itself. That it was the face of a mere hireling she knew full well ; but, somehow, she could not help being depressed. At that moment the verdict of Solomon himself, or the strongly pronounced opinion of the Queen of Sheba, could scarcely have seemed of more importance. She had quite failed to discover Cecil’s opinion of her ; for Cecil, though gracious, and, for her, gentle, had wrapped herself up in an impenetrable garment of grave reserve, and had not suffered any gleam of encouragement to shine forth. With a yearning tenderness poor Esther thought of the drawing-room in Queen Square, where Florence and her papa were probably taking their tea, and, perhaps, talking about her. Could this stately young lady who treated her kindly, yet decidedly *de haut en bas*, be really Florence Guise’s own cousin ?

“I should be so glad to go to bed,” said Esther, quietly ;
“*I am very tired.*”

"One is often tired, and can't go to bed," replied Smith, grimly. "Miss Cecil sent me into the village twice this morning, and it was slippery, and I am far from strong ; and when I came back the second time I felt quite fit for bed, and nothing else, I can tell you ; but there, I had to finish off some work, and then it was time for Miss Cecil to dress for dinner ; and though she never lets me do much for her, being of an independent spirit, and very stirring in her ways, yet she keeps me dandelling about, so that I can't rest myself ; I'd have been glad to go to bed, but I couldn't."

"All the same," replied Esther, "I do not see why I should not go to bed now, since Miss Uffadyne assured me that she would not require my services to-night. Are you Smith ?"

"No, I am not," was Smith's quick reply ; she was almost choking with passion.

"I beg your pardon, but Miss Uffadyne said she would send her maid to me, and she called her Smith."

"My mistress calls me what she pleases, young woman, but my equals and my *inferiors* call me *Miss* Smith."

"I beg your pardon, I did not know anything about it ; I thought, if I thought at all, that perhaps you were christened *Smith* !"

"Christened Smith, indeed !" she replied, with huge disdain ; "and what sort of people do you think my parents were, miss ?"

"I have no doubt they were highly respectable," returned Esther, half out of patience, half amused ; "people have strange tastes in names, you know."

"Strange tastes, indeed, to go into a church and get a helpless female infant called *Smith* ! My parents would have scorned such folly, such profanity, I may say ; my christened name is Amelia, I would have you know — Amelia Matilda, and Smith is my father's name, which I, being his lawful daughter, was born to, as I may say ; and there's plenty of Smiths in the world as are to be respected, and some of them drives their carriages, and has their place in the country and their house in town."

This irascible daughter of the Smiths was apt to lose her grammar along with her temper, you perceive.

"I know the Smiths are a very large family," said Esther, quietly, feeling at the same time that Amelia Matilda Smith was very nearly as provoking as Mrs. Hellicar. Was the world then full of aggravating people? she asked herself. If so, how was it possible to keep one's temper? And did aggravating people have fine names? and would the girls she came to teach be, as a body, exasperating?

How long this senseless altercation would have lasted can never be known, for at that moment Miss Uffadyne astonished Miss Amelia Matilda's weak nerves by standing between her and Esther, and inquiring what all this nonsense was about?

"I desired you to show Miss Kendall to her bedroom," said Cecil, in that tone which told her waiting-maid she was not to be trifled with; "and here you are gossiping and chattering in your usual foolish style. I am sure Miss Kendall is in no mood for conversation to-night. You may go; I will show Miss Kendall upstairs; but next time I give you an order, Smith, I shall expect it to be obeyed."

Smith retired, sulky and subdued, but vowing vengeance against Esther, who had been the cause of and the witness of her humiliation. Cecil waited to make no further observations; she signed to Esther to follow her, and conducted her at once to the friendly haven where she longed to be for that night at least.

"I hope you are not given to idle gossip and aimless talk," said Cecil, as she turned to go away.

"Oh, no, indeed! I think not, ma'am; but Miss Smith would talk."

"Smith has no sense at all, but she has her good qualities: she is faithful, and fidelity with me counts for much. Three years ago she nursed me through a severe and tedious illness, and such services are not to be forgotten; but I do not care to have my servants and the school-mistress too familiar; you will remember this?"

"Certainly, ma'am."

"Good night; I hope you will sleep off your fatigue. We will talk further in the morning."

Left alone, Esther tried in vain to clear her ideas;

whether things looked auspicious or not, she could not determine, nor could she divine in the least whether Miss Uffadyne thought she "would do." If she had known Miss Uffadyne a little better, she would have been quite sure that she was graciously approved. Cecil had unbent much more than her wont, but how was Esther to know that? Her manner was so entirely different from Florence's; Cecil was so keen, and energetic, and outspoken, so extremely unsentimental, that some people who did not understand her voted her to be unfeeling; and Florence was so sweet, so gentle, so frank, so loving; no wonder that the sudden change in patronesses rather perplexed the inexperienced Esther. She wisely determined at last that the best thing she could do would be to get into bed and go to sleep, letting the morrow and all the other days that were to come afterwards take thought for themselves. And so, after a brief but earnest prayer that she might be guided and blessed in all her ways, she lay down under the pretty chintz canopy, and nestled among the lavender-scented bed-clothes, and listened to the wind that was moaning fitfully about the house, wondering at herself, and at the changes that had come to pass, till the wild song of the night breeze became a lullaby, and she slept soundly, as youth, and health, and innocence will ever sleep, after a day of excitement and unaccustomed travel.

When she awoke, the grey wintry dawn was glimmering in the room, and she made haste to rise and dress; for though nothing had been said about the matutinal habits of the family, she felt sure that Miss Uffadyne must be an early riser, and it was quite on the cards that a lady of so much vigour might choose to converse with her before, instead of after, the breakfast hour. But the expected summons did not come; and Esther stood at her window, feeling very cold and very anxious, while she watched the sun rise on the beautiful landscape, that was passing fair even in its dark, sterile, wintry aspect. A few minutes before she had been almost depressed, though her spirits had regained much of their *natural elasticity* from the unbroken rest she had enjoyed; *but now there came to her a sweet sense of confidence, a new*

influx of hope, of energy, of intrepidity, and of determination not to fail in the race which lay before her. She looked out upon long bare fields, and naked woods, and a wavy expanse of heath and hill, and all was bathed in a tender roseate glow, and purple and golden lights were on the far-off sea-line ; the morning mists were lifted from the uplands, and showed the vast horizon circling as with a belt of crystal wide stretches of woodland, and open ground, and glittering water. It was very unlike the grimy prospect of roofs and chimneys which for so many years Esther had seen from that well-remembered window in the Queen Square house ; and the natural beauty that now met her gaze seemed to pass into her soul, and gave her a new life. Surely it would be easy to work and be patient, to toil and be content, in this pleasant world of Chilcombe ! And what would it be in the happy summer-time ? To all healthy minds, bright and lovely surroundings are inspiring.

“ Ah, yes,” she said to herself, “ I can work here ; I know I can. I shall have troubles, of course ; there will be disagreeables and difficulties, but I shall not mind. I even hope,” she continued, with all the rash ardour of youth, “ that there will be something to contend against, something really to strive with and to overcome by the power of love, and the strength of patience. I don’t want to have an easy time of it, I only want a fair field, and a clear opportunity, and I care not for the difficulties of the way I wonder when I shall begin. Miss Guise did not know exactly when the school opened.”

The clanging of a great bell roused Esther from her reverie ; it was evidently rung with a purpose, and she thought she had better go downstairs and ascertain whether she also were summoned. It was the prayer-bell, which was duly rung in Cecil’s household at half-past eight during the winter, and eight in spring and autumn, and at half-past seven in summer. It was a cardinal sin not to be seated in the dining-room within three minutes at the furthest after the bell had ceased to sound. The servants sat in a row, and Esther was accommodated with a chair at some little distance from them. Cecil sat in state with the breakfast equipage and a prayer-book

before her, and her own little Bible in her hand. Mr. Oswald did not appear.

Rather to Esther's surprise, Miss Uffadyne, after reading a chapter, which evidently came in course, commenced a sort of running commentary, giving a free and familiar exposition of verse after verse, with an ease and glibness that evidenced her own familiarity with the exercise. Then followed some of the prayers from the ritual of the Established Church, and then, the morning's devotions being concluded, the file of domestics withdrew ; and Esther, uncertain whither she ought to betake herself, lingered, feeling painfully awkward and shamefaced. Looking up, she perceived that Cecil was scanning her very closely, "taking the measure of her," as Dick would have expressed himself ; "reading her through and through," as Esther told herself afterwards ; and Cecil's large, dark, serious eyes did indeed seem to penetrate to your inmost thoughts, and if you had a secret to keep you would doubtless feel slightly uncomfortable under the calm, steady gaze that appeared to divine all that you were most unwilling to disclose.

I cannot say that Esther felt tranquil under the scrutiny ; the hot blood rose in her cheek, and her eyes sought the carpet at her feet ; but it was only for a moment, the rich colour was still mantling her generally sallow face when she looked up, and with her own wonderful, deep grey eyes, clear, limpid, and solemn, met her patroness's gaze. Cecil was startled at the transformation ; for the girl, spite of hard features and dingy complexion, looked radiantly beautiful ; that brilliant flush of colour, and those great shining eyes, changed her entirely ; and then Cecil perceived that Florence's *protégée* was really no common person, and her interest in her was thoroughly awakened.

"You will take breakfast with me, Miss Kendall," she said, after a minute's pause. "Mr. Uffadyne went out early."

From which speech Esther naturally inferred that she would have breakfasted alone, or with the upper servants, had the master of the house been at home. She had scarcely *caught a glimpse* of Oswald the preceding evening, for Cecil *had hurried her away* immediately ; and she was extremely

curious, or perhaps I ought to say desirous, of seeing him, since she knew perfectly well that he was her beloved Miss Guise's affianced husband. Florence had told her all about it, finishing up with, "But you know, Esther, I could never leave papa while his health is so delicate. He comes before everybody, even Oswald. I shall not think of marrying till I can leave him quite comfortably."

And Esther had said, "But could you not live together still?" And Florence had shaken her head, and replied, "We could, of course; but it must not be. I should belong to Oswald then, and I could not be unreservedly papa's. And Oswald is quite content to wait."

No wonder that Esther felt an interest in the man with whom Florence's future was so intimately blended; no wonder she wanted to behold the fortunate swain who was to possess so much beauty and grace and goodness, to win the one woman in all the world who in her partial judgment was most worthy to be won. So she felt slightly disappointed when she was advertised that for the present at least no introduction would take place; not that she wished for any special introduction; she did not want him to notice her at all, she only wished to see what manner of man he was, and to hear him speak, that she might judge whether he was worthy of the great prize he had drawn in the lottery of life. For somehow Esther had preconceived the notion that Mr. Oswald Uffadyne was by no means a match for Miss Florence Guise, and that in some way or other the marriage had been arranged as a matter of expediency.

"Ah, well!" she said to herself as she took her seat at the breakfast table; "I shall be sure to see him soon, and to see him pretty often. It does not matter."

CHAPTER XIV.

"CAN" AND "MUST."

ESTHER had expected that over the coffee and ham a sort of *examination of herself and her capacities* would be conducted;

and she was right, though at the time she believed herself to be mistaken. Cecil was too able a tactician to dash at once into the subject-matter of her inquiry ; she knew better than to disconcert the young woman by putting her at once through an elementary catechism of her acquirements, or by making her confess her supposed virtues, or testify of her weaknesses to her own disfavour. Cecil Uffadyne was accomplished in the art of "drawing out" any one whom it concerned her to know all about ; and so judiciously did she conduct the most seemingly irrelevant conversation, that a complete revelation and exposure of the person thus unconsciously tested was sure to be the result. So, instead of being questioned in English History and Lindley Murray, and put to her paces in all kinds of petty knowledge, Esther found herself talking about the neighbourhood of Queen Square, about Mr. Guise's painful neuralgic attacks, and even about Dick, though how she came to speak about him at all she never could divine. But when breakfast was over, Cecil knew a great deal about her young guest, and had decided that she had "the making of a woman in her," and that she might be made, and should be made, as far as she, Cecil Uffadyne, was concerned. And Cecil prided herself that whenever she undertook a task she performed it wisely, painstakingly, and usually with complete success.

"Now, then, we must have a little business talk," said Cecil, when the breakfast cloth was withdrawn, and they were left alone again. Esther coloured, and moved her hands restlessly. The dreaded examination was now to commence, and what would Miss Uffadyne think of her miserable ignorance ? Would she send her back to Queen Square by the next train, not even giving her a trial ? Esther felt as if she was a sort of impostor, to be sitting there to receive directions for duties which she was quite unqualified to discharge. Whatever were Esther Kendall's faults, self-esteem, and over-appreciation of her own abilities were not among them.

"Then you have really learned very little ?" said *Cecil at length*. "I mean you have not much book-knowledge ?"

"Very little indeed. I know it seems presumptuous, but Miss Guise did say that my knowledge, so far as it went, was very thorough," pleaded Esther.

"There is nothing I value so much as thoroughness," returned Cecil, with emphasis. "It implies so much ; it means not only solid attainment, but principle, truth, steadfastness of purpose. And there is nothing I more despise and shrink from than pretension. Let gold be gold, and let brass be brass ; one is as honest as the other in its way, but I do not like gilding. I hate shams."

"I think I hate them too," said Esther, her grey eyes lighting up as she spoke. "I am sure I hate them !" and she was thinking of Mrs. Hellicar's tinsel finery, of her Lowther Arcade jewellery, her painted paper dresses, and her wretched, base gentility.

"Have you been with people who shammed ?" asked Cecil, quickly.

"I have," was Esther's succinct answer.

"What did they sham ?"

"Everything, from honesty to Honiton lace," said Esther, bitterly. But then, remembering certain counsels of Mr. Guise, and some gentle words of Florence's, she added : "But, if you please, Miss Uffadyne, I would rather not talk about those people. Mr. and Miss Guise advised me not—not yet, at least ; they said I had better be silent about my relations while my wrongs were so fresh ; after a while they would seem not so great or so bitter as they do now. And Mr. Guise said to me nearly the last thing, 'It is in your own hands to do well, Esther ; and the prosperous can always afford to be generous and forgive the past.'"

"Do you mean that you cannot forgive these people the wrongs they have done you ?"

"I do mean it !" Esther burst out, excitedly ; "if you knew all you would not wonder, Miss Uffadyne. They were so cruel to me ; they made me work so hard, and they starved my mind, and degraded me in every way."

"No person can be really degraded who does not first degrade himself or herself. But I thought you said you did *not mind work* ?"

“No more I do ; no more I did ! But it was not mere work ; it was hard, weary, ceaseless toil, always the same, beginning every morning early, and ending only late at night, when nothing more could be done. There were no holidays ; the Sunday was not a day of rest ; and I was at everybody’s beck and call, and everybody might scold me and wreak their discontent upon me. Even the children were encouraged to torment me. But I would have borne it all had they not been so very unjust, had they not perpetually charged me with offences I never committed, and refused always to take my word, treating me as a practiced liar, though I scorned to say a word that was not truth, and they knew it. But I said I would not talk about them ; I had better not, I know ; it makes me feel wicked. I feel to want to punish them, to triumph over them ; and that is very bad of me ; Florence—I mean Miss Guise—said it was.”

“The Bible says so,” replied Cecil, gravely, “and that is of more consequence than what Florence Guise says. But do you not feel that you *ought* to forgive your relatives ? ”

“Yes, I suppose I ought, but—but *I cannot*.”

“You mean you will not. We can always do what ought to be done. It may be difficult, it may be painful, but it *can* be done ; *it must be done*. Remember that, Esther ; such a word as ‘cannot’ ought not to be in your vocabulary, or it should only be used in reference to wrong doing. You may boldly say, ‘I cannot commit sin, I cannot be weak ;’ but you may never say, ‘I cannot obey God because it is difficult to do so.’”

Cecil spoke with much harshness, and Esther felt as if it would be impossible to love so stern a mistress. How unlike Florence, whose words and tones were always of the gentlest ; and yet there was something in Cecil that she felt she must admire and perforce respect, perhaps even reverence.

“I will try to do what is right,” she said humbly ; “but I am afraid I am not always clear what the right is, and *besides—it is best to say the truth—I have not at all a good temper.*”

“That is a sad confession to make ; but it is better to make it than to take credit for an amiability which you do not possess. However, you are not a child, and you must learn to control your temper ; it is of the first importance that you should do so. Of course you cannot deal with children without having your temper tried.”

“Of course not,” assented Esther, thinking of the little Hellicars ; “but I shall have more chance with children who are expected to obey me, and who are not systematically taught to despise me.”

“I shall always uphold your authority with the girls, if that is what you mean. Even if I differed from you I should not allow your pupils to perceive it, unless, indeed, it were something that involved a point of conscience. If I think you are acting wrongly or unwisely I shall not hesitate to tell you so very plainly, but the matter will be between you and me alone.”

“Thank you ; you are very kind.”

“That is only common justice ; you could have no chance with the village girls nor any with their parents, and you will have to deal with them, too, if they could perceive anything like a breach between us. Only be careful, for much responsibility will rest in your hands, and in a rash moment you may do much mischief. Now about your real and regular work. Your school-hours vary according to the season of the year. You will open school to-morrow morning at nine o'clock precisely ; I am very particular about punctuality. You will dismiss the children at twelve, and two hours are allowed for rest and dinner. Classes are formed again at two, and at four school is over for the day. As the season advances the time changes to half-past four, beginning, of course, a little later in the afternoon. I take all the classes in turn every week, so that I always know exactly the rate of progress. The routine of study will be best explained when the time comes. You can sing ?”

“A little—that is, I can join in any hymn-tune.”

“You can lead the children ?”

“I think I can ; I am nearly sure I can if no one else is *present*.”

“That is a foolish feeling, and you must get rid of it. You can either do a thing properly or you cannot ; if you can, it does not matter who witnesses the performance ; if you cannot it ought not to be attempted. What is called modesty is often nothing more than a contemptible bashfulness, born of miserable self-consciousness and a perverted vanity. When we shrink from an action that is expected of us it is generally because we only know ourselves to be incompetent, or because we fear lest we should fail to gain applause. Simply to do the thing that is required of us in the best way we can, not thinking at all of the effect produced, is the most comfortable to ourselves and the most satisfactory to others. There is a singing class connected with the church, and I will make arrangements for your joining it. They practise some secular music besides chants and anthems ; it will be an advantage to you. As for your private studies, I shall be pleased to be of use to you ; I will tell you what books to read, and provide them also. Your evenings will be your own after you have corrected exercises, and placed the sewing work in readiness for the morrow, and, of course, you may and should make good use of the early morning and of the middle of the day. It is best to have no idle time.”

To all this Esther could respond ; she did not wish for any idle time ; she cared not how fully she was occupied, provided the employment conduced to mental improvement, and she felt no fear of being overworked, for her health was excellent, and in this pure air it seemed quite natural to feel blithe and energetic. Cecil rather relished her evident enthusiasm on the subject of work, and only hoped it might last. Miss Martingale and one or two others had set out with the best intentions, but flagged very quickly, unable to keep step with their patroness's untiring, vigorous march. It was a remarkable fact that Cecil tired out all who tried to work with her, and Oswald declared that “to run in harness with her was just impossible, unless one wanted to die of shattered nerves, and accelerated pulse.” Still, Miss Uffadyne felt assured, as again she gazed into Esther's clear, *thoughtful* eyes, that she was of a different type from Miss Martingale and the others, who were so speedily let and

hindered in running the race that was set before them, and she had good hopes that she would go on her way steadily to the end.

"It is not so much teaching the girls a quantity of things," said Cecil in conclusion, "as training them to habits of piety, order, punctuality, and neatness. I want them to know their duty in the station to which it has pleased God to call them, and to learn to do it."

Esther thought if they knew their duty, and practised it, nothing more could be desired of them; but then, would such a standard of education be easily attained? And was *she* of all persons qualified to bring them to so satisfactory a result? She would do her best, but oh! how much she feared that her incompetency would be perceived, and that she would find herself failing in every attempt, just because she was unable to perceive the right line of action.

In another hour Esther found herself walking through the village, on the road to the school-house. An old woman hobbled out of a cottage, and handed Miss Uffadyne the keys as soon as she appeared, dropping a bob-curtsey as she did so, and making a sort of compromise reverence to Esther, whom she eyed very curiously. Several women and some children came out to have a look at the new schoolmistress; by one village matron she was voted "a mere slip of a girl, fit only to go to school herself;" while the clerk's wife remarked that she was as tall as Miss Uffadyne herself, and looked quite the lady. More and more persons appeared as they crossed from the almshouse porch to the school-house, which was on the other side of the road, and Esther knew that she was running the gauntlet of public opinion. How strange to her looked the quiet village-street and the village-green, where a poor idiot boy sat warming himself in the bright January sunshine; how strange were the funny little shops, and the unfamiliar people, and the staring children, who, however, only stared furtively, lest they should bring down upon themselves the anger of Miss Cecil, and be lectured on the spot for want of manners. But the idiot boy came forward with *his* terrible vacant smile on his poor face, and put *his* horny hand confidentially in Cecil's gloved palm,

and then he patted Esther encouragingly on the shoulder, saying, like a two-year's child, "Good! nice! good! Poor Jack, me!" and he tapped his heart, and touched his forehead, and looked piteous.

There was no hardness or hauteur in Cecil's manner as she talked to poor Jack; she laughed with him, and let him caress her hand and stroke down her sable muff, though she had to speak firmly to him before he would go away. He might have been troublesome if permitted to go with them to the school-house; but Cecil, even when most determined, spoke kindly and soothingly, and Esther perceived that as yet she had seen only one side of her patroness's character. With all the rashness of youth Esther had pronounced Miss Uffadyne to be good, *very* good, and remarkably clever and strongminded, but utterly unloveable. Now she told herself it would be better to suspend judgment for a little while.

The school-house was not large, but it was pretty and commodious, and the room which would be the chief scene of Esther's future labours was lofty, well ventilated, and thoroughly warmed. Everything was newly scrubbed, and the desks and forms were in their places; bright prints and excellent maps were on the walls, also a chronological chart and some diagrams, the very sight of which shook Esther's nerves, because she knew nothing at all about them, and could not even tell what they were. She supposed they had something to do with geometry, and she might as well be called upon critically to explain the differential calculus as to say what geometry meant, or what was represented by the lines, and cubes, and triangles, that looked so imposingly on paper! But Cecil never even glanced at the pentagons, and polygons, and quadrants; the truth being that the geometrical illustrations had been sent in by some society or other, which professed to diffuse universal knowledge, and to open up a royal road to every branch of learning, and they had been hung up in derision by Oswald, who pretended to argue that the girls would make beds more scientifically, and set a table with more mathematical precision, if they were duly *inducted in the first principles* of geometry.

Esther surveyed with interest her own special seat, a little

raised above the common level of the room. She was favoured with a cushioned chair, and a table full of drawers, which she might keep locked, if she pleased, and in a small recess close by was a book-case, containing many well-chosen volumes, all neatly covered and labelled, and arranged on a system. System and neatness reigned wherever Cecil Uffadyne was mistress. And to-morrow that room would be resounding with the hum of voices, and Esther would be launched on the voyage which she could not help fearing might end in disappointment and shipwreck. She could only hope, and resolve to do her very best.

CHAPTER XV.

PERMANENTLY ENGAGED.

ESTHER went into quiet raptures about her new home. She might have lived at the school-house, for there were rooms there intended for the schoolmistress's occupation, but Cecil thought it better that so young a girl should be under matronly care, and moreover she thought the short walk four times a day between the school and the farm would be beneficial to Esther's health. Cecil was a great advocate for plenty of fresh air, for regular exercise, especially for a good brisk constitutional, taken every day without much regard to the state of the weather; and Esther's peripatetic powers and inclinations certainly raised her in the estimation of her active, practical-minded young patroness.

The Slade was rather a large farm, quite on the outskirts of the village; the house had once been a manorial residence; it was very old, very picturesque, and very roomy; and Mrs. King, the farmer's wife, one day told Cecil that when the summer came again she really thought she would let lodgings, as so many of her rooms were entirely unoccupied. Cecil, who had just then promised the Guises to give Esther a trial, immediately bethought herself that the Slade would be a comfortable and respectable home for *Esther, who would be solitary living alone at the school-*

house, particularly during the winter months. Besides, Cecil was sure Florence would not like the idea of Esther living entirely by herself, as she must do if she succeeded to Miss Martingale's apartments as well as to her office; and Cecil felt too—she was very prudent and worldly-wise for her age—that it was inexpedient it should be so. Nowhere could she be safer, and if she were a good girl, nowhere could she be happier, than with Mrs. King, of the Slade; for Mrs. King was a kindly, sensible woman, with a sort of motherly instinct about her, which attracted her towards all young creatures, especially to girls who were motherless; for she had lost several daughters of her own, and the only surviving one had married, and gone away to live in Australia.

She caught at once at Cecil's notion, and agreed to receive the young schoolmistress as her inmate; and the proper arrangements were made, and a chamber selected for Esther's use; and the whole matter was concluded in less time than it would have taken many people to think about it. And Esther, when she saw her home, was charmed, and oh! how grateful! She took to the great kitchen at once; such a kitchen! it would have swallowed up the whole basement-story of the house in Queen Square. It was so clean, so bright, so like a picture, with its wide fireplace, its broad settles in the chimney corner, its air of business, and also its atmosphere of mingled thrift and plenty and hospitality. At one end the servants took their meals; at the other the family took theirs, and Mrs. King's eye was everywhere, for she was a farmeress in doors as well as out.

She was not a widow, as you may suppose, but the wife of a too easy, good-tempered, and rather lazy man, who was the best of husbands so far as his affections were concerned, but not so far as regarded his duties, which fell far too heavily upon the faithful wife, who was most emphatically his better half. Mr. King had no judgment worth speaking of; his wife was always to be relied on, and her opinion was quoted throughout Chilcombe. Mr. King was content to let things *take their course*, and he disliked anything which drove him *out of the beaten track*. Mrs. King never rested till an error

was amended ; and if a more excellent way presented itself, she followed it out at any cost of time and trouble. She was a woman of progress, yet judicious ; she went in for modern improvements without being rash ; her industry was proverbial, her good plain sense was quoted by all her neighbours, and anyone in trouble of mind, body, or estate generally sought counsel, or comfort, or aid, as the case required, at the Slade. Moreover, she had the happy tact to manage her husband without his perceiving it ; true it is, he was very slow to perceive anything that did not appear upon the surface, but the outside world never saw much of the farmeress's domination. She was at the helm, as everybody knew, and she was the source of all frugal schemes, the very spirit and life of the whole household ; but she so contrived it that all great changes seemed to emanate from the male head of the family, and certainly the principal orders were given by him, though, by the way, if you had gone incontinently to farmer King, and asked for commands, he would certainly have replied, “ 'Bide awhile till I ask the missus ; she knows best.”

Besides the kitchen, which was all ruddy with firelight when Esther first saw it, there was the parlour, a long, low room, quaintly but well furnished, and very pleasant in the summer time, and two other rooms, used only for storing apples and other useful farm produce. Esther's own room was large and very comfortable ; the furniture was plain enough certainly, but it was solid, and exquisitely clean. There was an oriel window, too, which delighted her extremely, and the arms of the family who had once owned the house were still imperfectly blazoned in coloured glass right above the opening of the casement ; and from this window there was a prospect which—so Mrs. King declared—exceeded in extent and beauty any other in the parish. Cecil was fain to confess that from no window in her own house could she command so fair and wide a prospect. And when the summer came, this oriel window would be wreathed with roses and clematis, and the garden beneath would be a very paradise of flowers ; for horticulture was the one recreation which Mrs. King allowed herself, and if she ever indulged in an extravagance, it was in the case of a rare

plant, or choice bulb, or wonderful seedling, or something new and exquisite, that her neighbours had never seen before. The rector, and the Uffadynes, and several other families of note, always came to see her roses, and her hollyhocks ; and her chrysanthemums annually inspired several head-gardeners with the spirit of envy, while her great lavender-hedge was the wonder of all the country round.

Esther was to board with the farmer and his wife, and be in all respects as one of themselves ; and Mrs. King had so long been looking forward to her arrival that it was quite a disappointment to her when she found that in the first place she was to go to the Chenies, for such was the name of the Uffadynes' abode.

It was a right motherly welcome which Esther received, and she felt herself straightway at home ; and Mrs. King "took to her" at first sight ; and the farmer, as a matter of course, took to what his wife approved, and declared that it was quite a blessing to have a comely lass in the house once more, a lass whom they might make believe to be a daughter ; and he really thought she featured his Rebecca, who had married and gone away over the seas, and that she was very much like little Elsie, who had died twelve years ago of a sort of decline following upon measles ; and he was sure she had a smile like poor Janie's, and Janie was in the churchyard by the side of Elsie and several other children who had died in infancy.

In after years, when Esther's whole life was changed, when it was fairest, and sweetest, and most golden, she remembered with tender affection those first days and weeks at the Slade Farm. The school-work in one way was not nearly so heavy or arduous as she expected ; in another way she found that her energies were taxed to the very utmost. She had feared most her own ignorance, lest her elder scholars should be in advance of her ; lest her incompetency should be suddenly disclosed, to her own shame and confusion, and to the disappointment of the kind friends who had relied upon her. But she had thought little about the *continual discretion*, the steady judgment, the self-control, *and the self-possession* that would be required from her ;

and before the first week was over she knew that it would be her own fault if she did not keep far ahead of the most advanced of all her pupils ; but she knew also, and with trembling, that her powers were taxed to their very extent to keep up the proper discipline, to act as arbitress in all disputes, to decide all vexed and knotty questions, and, above all things, to suit the training of each child to its disposition and capacities, to try to draw out the inherent good, and repress the natural evil tendencies, in the wisest, kindest, and most effectual way. It was hard work, far harder than the working out of complicated sums in a rule she had never learned herself, worse than conducting a historical or geographical class, with Miss Uffadyne close at hand, listening to every word she uttered, and far, far worse than the turning down of hems, and the placing of gussets, and setting of gathers, which she had dreaded so much, knowing how great fault Florence had found with all her needlework during the time when she had been striving to qualify herself for this particular department of her office.

But here Mrs. King was invaluable ; she not only knew all the mysteries of sempstress-ship, being an adept at cutting out and contriving and mending in all its branches, but she knew a great deal about human nature, particularly about feminine juvenile nature, as it seemed to Esther ; for she could always give advice, and show her exactly the course she ought to take, pointing out the Scylla and Charybdis on either hand, into which her own inexperience and quick temper would inevitably have carried her, and steering her clear of all collisions and squabbles and grand mistakes, such as undermine the authority of a ruler whose claims to prudence and sagacity are not as yet thoroughly acknowledged.

Very soon Esther began to take a deep interest in the children ; and she was so anxious to do her very best for them, apart from satisfying Miss Uffadyne, that Mrs. King kept a keen watch over her, lest she should injure her own health. Of course they were a medley, these Chilcombe girls ; some *were incorrigibly* idle, and some stupid ; some *were giddy*, and others saucy and defiant ; and one or two

were really evilly disposed, and must necessarily be expelled unless reformation should ensue ; but, as a whole, they were quite as satisfactory as any number of village girls promiscuously brought together could be expected to be ; and Esther managed them so wisely and so successfully, that Cecil actually thanked Florence for sending her just the kind of young woman she wanted : “one who would obey orders punctiliously even, and yet had plenty of sound sense to act when left to her own unaided sources.”

It needs not to tell how delighted Florence was ; but Mrs. Hellicar turned of a yellowish green when it was reported to her that Esther was filling her situation most successfully, being liked by the children and their parents, highly approved in the village, and valued by her patroness ; and poor Myra remarked that “some people always were in luck, and some people were very deep, and some people would find out some day that all was not gold that glittered !” And she was very cross all the evening, and snubbed her husband, and exasperated Dick, and roused Lizzie’s temper, till that young lady whipped the little ones all round, and went sulky and supperless to bed.

But Lizzie’s spite, and aunt Myra’s aggravated state of temper, mattered little now to Esther ; she went on her way happily enough, and her heart bounded with thankfulness when one day, early in March, Cecil told her that if she liked to remain at Chilcombe they would like to keep her, and she might consider herself to be permanently engaged. She got on better and better with the girls now she knew them intimately ; every day she found her stock of knowledge increasing. Cecil was very kind to her, and helped her in a hundred ways, and Mr. and Mrs. King would have been sorely grieved had she been taken away from them, for they had learned to regard her with a very sincere affection. Truly the lines had fallen to her in pleasant places ; God had been very good to her, and she knew it, and longed to serve and praise Him better. And all this time, strange to say, she had never seen Oswald Uffadyne, Florence’s betrothed !

He had been in London, and of course he had spent much of his time in Queen Square ; also he had been in Paris on

business for Mr. Guise, and Esther learnt that the great law case of the Guises was on the point of being decided. And Mr. Oswald Uffadyne would not be at home until after Easter.

CHAPTER XVI.

ESTHER'S HOLIDAYS.

THAT year the Easter-tide fell in the second week of April. It was a peculiarly forward season ; the hedges were green already, and the woodlands wearing just that warm flush of colour which shows that life is throbbing in all their arteries, and waiting only a few more days of shower and sunshine to burst forth into all the vivid verdant loveliness of a perfect spring. Primroses nestled in every shady place, gleaming star-like among their crinkled leaves ; by the brook side the slopes were whited over with the delicate anemone, dotted here and there with the golden cups of the modest celandine, a carpet of gold and silver showing sumptuously in the happy Easter sunshine ; violets were plentiful everywhere, white and purple, scented and scentless, and the intense blue ground-ivy went creeping about among little clusters of the humble bitter cress and tiny coronals of the still humbler whitlow-grass. Also the wild narcissus was in its first rich bloom, and the orchards were white with blossom of pear and plum, touched here and there with faint carmine streaks of the unfolded rosy buds upon the apple trees ; the cuckoo had been heard calling in the lanes, the caw of busy rooks was heard in the tall trees by the churchyard, and morning, noon, and night, the song of the lark rang out high and clear, far away in the blithe creature's own " glorious privacy of light."

How Esther revelled in the moist bright spring-tide of the country, words can scarcely tell. It was a new life, this watching the gradual resurrection of the green things of the wood and the *flowers of the field*. She noted how day by day the broad sun sank to his rest in the distant blue waters

more and more to the west, and then still onwards towards the icy north, the land of the unsetting sun and the everlasting snow. She was never tired of walking up and down the garden paths, or of wandering in the woods, or rambling along the banks of the meandering brooklet that wound its silvery way through the green lowlands about Chilcombe, soon mingling its pure wavelets with a river at no great distance, and so passing onwards to the sea. She loved to linger in these pleasant haunts, revelling in each fresh beauty as it unfolded itself in scaly bulb or tender bract, or delicate young leaf, or sweet pale floweret ; rejoicing in the voice of birds, in the balmy breezes, in the soft warm airs breathing from the south, and in the brilliant April skies, now one glorious dome of stainless azure, now flecked with fleecy clouds, and now shadowed with piled up nimbus masses floating inland from the sea, pouring down on the grateful earth the warm revivifying showers of the gracious spring-tide. Sunshine and rain, cloud and rainbow, wavy hills and emerald smiling dales, morning and evening—all brought to Esther their own peculiar joy, ever blending, ever changing, ever filling her heart with a sense of pure unmingled happiness, and with innocent blisses such as she never knew again in after days, when her life was made up of passionate loves and weary longings, and sorrows that seemed at times too heavy to be borne.

And in that fair green spring-time it was as if the girl's soul were born again, and came to her all fresh and tender as a little child's. There were no great throes of birth, no startling transitions, no grand upheavings of her moral and spiritual nature ; softly as dreams the old shadows of darkness floated off, and like the beauteous dawn of day shone out the light of lights that purified and gladdened all her heart, and made her a new creature in very truth. She could afford now to forgive the Hellicars ; it was impossible to live in such a mental atmosphere and wish them any ill—nay, she yearned to do them good, to be of real service to them. And the inner transformation had, as a natural consequence, changed the heavy, sullen countenance ; the harsh lines of it were softened, *a faint glow stole* over the thin, sallow cheeks, and the wonderful deep eyes were all ablaze with soul, and beaming with

awakened thought. A large and perfect charity had taken possession of her spirit, and she loved all who came within her sphere, not only Mr. and Mrs. King, her new-found father and mother, and Cecil, and the children she taught day by day, and some humble friends in the village, but the very animals that lay down under the shadow of the Chilcombe trees, and the daisy-sprinkled meadows themselves, and the little birds that twittered under the eaves, and perched upon the rose-sprays round about her windows. When she saw the sleek cattle come up from milking, or heard the warble of the blackbird or the piping of the thrush, her bosom swelled with kindly, fervent emotion, and, like the "Ancient Mariner," she blessed the happy creatures "unaware." Indeed, at that time, her every thought towards others was a silent benediction. How changed from the weary, slovenly girl, who had watched the twilight clouds on that dull October evening from the upper window in the dingy Queen Square house, brooding over her wrongs, longing hopelessly, as it seemed then, for some break in the heavy grey clouds that had gathered round her young life ever since she could remember—hoping against hope, struggling vainly against the slavery of her lot, at feud with God and with her fellow-beings—a miserable, ignorant, neglected human soul, uncared for by any mortal, and, as she sadly told herself, forgotten by her Maker.

Of course Esther had her Easter holidays. On Thursday afternoon she dismissed the school, which was not to re-assemble till the following Wednesday morning—nearly a whole week of leisure and delightful freedom. Esther liked her work—nay, she was beginning to love it, but after weeks of regular unintermitting toil, the season of rest was sweet, and she felt an almost childish sense of relief when, the room being cleared, she turned the key in the desk which contained the registers, and knew that it need not be used again for five long happy days; for that they could be otherwise than happy never once occurred to her. What walks she would take, what books she would read, what a long letter she would write to her beloved Miss Guise; also one to Biddy, *who would be delighted at the sight of an epistle addressed*

entirely to herself ; she was not even sure but that she would write a few kind, pleasant lines to Mrs. Hellicar. And she would study, of course ; Cecil had given her some lessons in French, and she only wanted time to write any number of exercises, and perfect herself in the regular verbs, before she attempted anything beyond. Among the books which Florence had given her was a charming little French book for beginners, entitled, as far as I remember, the "Little Model Book" ; but it is years since I saw it last, and on its title-page it bore, as a motto, "Learn something perfectly, and apply everything thereunto," which wise axiom Esther adopted as her own, and determined to learn and comprehend the one subject in hand before she took a single step towards another. The next day, Good Friday, would be her birthday, her seventeenth ; oh ! how different from the sixteenth in the year just gone by.

And when she came down to breakfast next morning she found her birthday presents awaiting her—a volume of Wordsworth's Poems, for which she had been longing, from the farmer, and a pretty spring dress from Mrs. King. Last year no one had thought it worth while to remember the anniversary of her birth. Last year there had been no lovely flowers and fresh-springing grass, no singing-birds ; only the London sparrows twittering and hopping about on the worn turf of the desolate Square garden ; only hard work, plenty of it, and no one word of praise ; only the dreary days coming and going in their grey monotony, with no promise of the brighter hours at hand.

When breakfast was over, and she and Mrs. King were busy with the tea-cups and plates, the question arose as to who was going to church. The farmer stayed at home, because he never thought of going to church, except on Sundays ; and, for certain domestic reasons, Mrs. King found it incumbent on herself to remain also ; but there was no reason why Esther should not go to join in the services of the day.

"I was thinking," she said, presently, "of going as far as *Helmsley* ; I should so like to see the church that Miss Cecil was talking about the other day. Would it be wrong to

go there this morning? It is not quite like Sunday, you know."

"It would not be wrong at all, and it would be a nice walk for you, and quite safe if you took Rover."

"But I mean to stay for the service."

"Rover will wait for you outside; you have only to tell him so before you go into the porch, and he will understand and obey. I should scarcely like you to be in Helmsley Wood quite alone, for there are gipsies there sometimes; but the dog will be quite guard enough."

"Need I go through the wood?"

"You need not; you can go all the way by the lane, and a very pretty lane it is, following the course of the brook; but the wood takes off more than a mile and a half of the road; besides, it is so lovely, full of your favourite flowers, the anemone and the lesser celandine; and a little stream that unites with the brook just where it joins the river runs twinkling under the trees; you will like it very much. Never mind those saucers, child: the walk is a long one, and you will be late. Go and get ready at once."

What a pleasant walk that was! A two miles' walk between the half-leaved hedgerows, and under the grand old forest-trees, just arrayed in their most delicate garments of palest green, and olive grey, and richest ruddy brown. The bright sun brought out these vivid yet tender hues, while over all slept the deep blue sky, clearer and more intensely azure than is the wont of English skies, with lark-music ringing out triumphantly in the dazzling golden air.

But far off Esther heard the low sweet chiming of bells, and she knew she must not loiter, for to be late in church was one of the things she always felt ashamed of; so she walked on pretty quickly through the wood, not heeding the pleasant tale that the gurgling waters were telling, nor the nods of welcome she thought the flowers gave her; and just as the "tolling-in" commenced, she reached the churchyard gate, and passing between ancient graves up to the deep porch, she bade Rover lie down and wait her coming out.

"Please not to drive away my dog," she said to the old

beadle, who came out to meet a stranger ; “ he will not come into the church, or disturb anybody ; he will stay under the great yew-tree till he sees me again.”

And the old man promised that her wishes should be respected, the dog should not be interfered with ; and he thought what a sweet young lady this was, and how graciously she spoke, and he hastened to place her in one of the best seats near the reading-desk.

Esther never forgot the simple service of that morning, the sweet singing of the village choir, the low, deep voice of the officiating clergyman, or the green gloom that filled the little old Norman church, with its heavy pillars, its antique carving and its low-browed chancel, lit by one grand and “ storied window richly dight,” letting in the rich spring sunshine through gorgeous colouring of purple and ruby-red and gold. There was one altar-tomb—a warrior and his ruffled dame lying side by side, with placid features and uplifted hands, and a ray of richest amber and purple fell aslant the long robes of the lady, and the marble mail of the knight ; and Esther wondered for how many centuries the sunbeam had stolen in upon them thus, and who they were, and what was their history, and had they lived at quiet Helmsley, that they were buried side by side in the solemn shadow of the chancel ? But near at hand was another monument, of recent date. Only a few years had elapsed since she to whom it was raised had passed away from earth ; it was a simple white marble tablet, supporting a plain cross, wreathed with lilies. The inscription was only “ Alice Stapleton, died August 18, 18—, aged nineteen years. *For we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of Heaven.*”

The words caught Esther’s glance, for the tablet was close to her, and she could not raise her eyes without seeing it. “ *Through much tribulation !*” Was it indeed so ? And this young creature of nineteen, had she “ entered in ” through anguish, and dismay, and bitterness of spirit ? Or had wasting illness and cruel suffering worn her life away ? *Whatever it was, it was all over now ; she had passed to a land where there is no more pain, or death, or blighted*

hopes, or crushed-out happiness—where God Himself has wiped away all tears from every eye ; and what did it matter if there had been tribulation sore and bitter on this side the shiny portal of the skies ?

A sudden terror came upon Esther as she knelt. Life had grown to her so fair, youth was so promising, the coming vista of years shone so sweetly through the dim haze of futurity—could it indeed be that sorrow was the portion of all who would inherit the joy of the world to come ? Was it really the will of the Father that the children should go softly all their days, ever dreading loss, and finding grief, and pain, and bitterness ? Then she remembered what that day commemorated—the great mystery of the *Cross* ; the death and passion of our Lord Jesus Christ ; the shameful, agonising close of the one pure and perfect life ; and it seemed as if, echoing through the dim low aisles of the little church, came a faint whisper of the Master's words—“Follow Me !” *Whither ?* To shame, and suffering, and loss ; to death itself, if only it please Him to lead the way. That is the first stage of the journey. Afterwards, when patience has had its perfect work, and faith grown large and steadfast, and knowledge multiplied—the rest that remaineth, the glory that is to be revealed, the joy unspeakable ! First the cross, and then the crown !—here the hill Difficulty and the valley of Humiliation ; there the land of Beulah ! The sepulchre before the resurrection ; the agony in the Garden before the Ascension !

Something of this Esther dimly felt as the words of the Gospel for the day fell on her ears, and she remembered some verses that Florence and she had read together one Sunday in Queen Square. She had often read them since, for they were in Keble's “Christian Year,” and after she came to Chilcombe she had bought a small cheap copy for herself. Now they came to her afresh, and she found herself repeating :—

“ Lovest thou praise ? The Cross is shame ;
Or ease ? The Cross is bitter grief ;
More pangs than heart or tongue can frame
Were suffered there without relief.

“ We of that Altar would partake,
But cannot quit the cost. No throne
Is ours to leave for Thy dear sake ;
We cannot do as Thou hast done.

“ We cannot part with Heaven for Thee,
Yet guide us in Thy track of love ;
Let us gaze on where light should be,
Though not a beam the clouds remove.”

The sermon was a very brief one, and it was still early when the small congregation separated. The purple light had passed from the altar-tomb, and the silent forms lay now in shadow ; and, looking back into the green gloom that filled the empty church, Esther saw again the tablet in memory of the unknown Alice Stapleton, and again she thought of the “great tribulation” to be endured on the road to the heavenly kingdom, and her spirit sank within her. She had known so much sadness in the past, and would it ever be the same again ?

But when she passed out of the porch into the sunshine, the brightness came back again, and she forgot the Lesson of the day and Alice Stapleton’s memorial text. The sun was shining gloriously ; there was not a cloud in all the sky ; the rich slopes of Helmsley and the fruitful, well-watered valley of Chilcombe lay before her ; while in the distance the silvery sea sparkled on the blue horizon, the warm wind fanned her cheek, the blossoming boughs waved rustlingly, and the birds sang joyously in the tender leafage of the branches. Rover was waiting patiently under the yew-tree, but he gave one bark of delight at perceiving that this long, weary watch was over, and with a bound he prepared to set out on the homeward walk.

“Good doggie,” said Esther, lovingly patting his shaggy head ; “good, patient Rover, we will have a right bonnie ramble in the wood, and gather anemones and violets if we can find them, at least one of us will ; and we will sit down and listen to the music of the brook, and hear what the little waves are saying to the mossy stones ; and then we will go home, Rover, and get our dinners, and you shall have a *fine* plateful, dear, good doggie.”

Rover seemed to comprehend, for he gave another little

quiet bark, that might well have been taken for an assent to so satisfactory a proposition, and then he trotted on gravely by Esther's side as became a dog of his age and responsibilities, only running off now and then to examine something in the ditch, or to snuff about suspiciously in the region of possible rabbit-holes. A most exemplary dog was Rover; but dogs, like men, have their especial weaknesses, and Rover's great weakness and prime temptation was rabbits, though he knew full well that he had no business to hunt them except under certain recognised conditions. I am sorry to say Rover, conscientious as he was, too often yielded to the temptation, and pursued rabbits without regard to conditions; but I believe he always repented after the deed was done, and suffered from remorse.

How pleasant it was that day in Helmsley wood! The lovely wood anemone, the pale fragile wind-flower of the poets and the rustics, was there by thousands; the white cups shone in silver sheen among the springing moss, and here and there were patches of golden celandine and little tufts of delicate blue dog-violets. Under the trees lay last year's leaves, still crisp to the tread; and twigs and broken branches, lichen-grown already, relics of past wintry storms, were scattered about among the fresh green moss, and the gay flowers, and the sere foliage of the dead year.

Esther found a seat on the gnarled root of a huge old oak, and there she sat with Rover lazily blinking at her side; there she sat, thinking how bright the world was, and how good God was to make so much brightness and beauty for His creatures; thinking, too, of the grey days that had been—the grey, weary, hopeless days before she knew that such a person as Florence Guise existed. There had come a rift in the leaden clouds when she had least expected it, and lo! the grey cold vapours had rolled away, the sun had shone out, revealing the soft azure of the summer sky; his beams were warm, and caressing, and life-giving, and all the landscape was fair, and her own pathway therein a track of shining gold!

And all the while the lark sang *jubilate* high over the tall trees; *his exulting lay* thrilled all the passionate heart of the

young and happy girl ; and mingling with his clear warble was the gurgling ripple of the tiny stream forcing its way between the stones, singing a sort of lullaby in the quiet golden noontide. And Esther lingered there till a great and deep peace settled upon her heart, a blissful calm in which she knew that all would be well with her now and evermore ; that in her the Father's will would be accomplished, and that all that will was love—pure, perfect, all-pervading love, which chose ever the best way and the safest way for the children of its care, though rough might be the road, and dark the clouds, and arid all the land about for a little while, only for a little while.

“ He who made
The heart doth know its need, but what are we,
And whence have we our wisdom, unafraid
With hands unskilled to vex a mystery
We cannot disentangle ? ”

That evening Esther wrote in a little book in which she sometimes put down her own thoughts :—“ Good Friday evening. This has been my birthday, and I am seventeen years old. Everything is changed, blissfully changed, since this time last year. I am not the same ; the world around me is not the same ; Heaven is not the same. All is bright, and sweet, and good ! Oh, my God, how kind Thou art to me ! How could I ever doubt Thee, ever believe that I was forgotten by Thee ? by Thee, who never for a single moment forgettest the smallest of Thy creatures ! What do I not owe Thee ? how great is my debt of gratitude ! Can I ever pay it ? Ah, no ! but then I can *love* ! she to whom much is forgiven loves much ; and I feel, I know, Thou hast forgiven all my waywardness, and sullenness, and dark, bitter unbelief ; Thou hast forgiven all my sin—my pride, and discontent, and wicked sense of hate ; and now I walk in Thine own light, in the sunshine that Thou hast cast about me like a royal garment ! And I am happy, so happy ! And I will try to be happy always, even if for a time the sunshine should depart, and the heavy, grey, impenetrable *clouds come back* again ; for Thou knowest best, O my God,

Thou knowest best, and Thou hast taught me to *trust* Thee. Oh, this sense of trust, is it not sweet? Is it not good to feel that one need not really trouble about anything? What shall I thank Thee for first, my God? I scarcely know, so many are Thy rich gifts! Above all things thou hast given me *Thyself*! Thou hast taken my heart and opened it, and filled it with *love*—love to Thee first, and to Thy creatures next. How my heart bounded when this morning they sang, ‘Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ!’ I thank Thee, then, for Thyself—for Thy blessed Son, who is indeed Thyself—Thyself wearing our mortal nature, touched with our infirmities, and knowing in very deed and truth that we are but dust. I think if we forget the perfect *human* nature of our dear Lord, we lose so much of the comfort and of the joy we may draw from a union with Him. And I thank Thee too, my God, for my kind friends, such friends! so true, so good, they must come from Thee! And for this pleasant home, and for regular happy work, and for rest when labour is over; and for this glorious spring-time, so fresh, and fair, and sweet; and for the flowers, and the young leaves and buds, and the breezes thrilling all the branches; and for the voices of the birds, and of the little lambs in the green meadows; and for the sound of waves, and for all things that Thou, my Father, hast created, for Thou and Thou alone givest us all things richly to enjoy. And I think—nay, I am sure—I should not enjoy these pleasant things half so much if I thought I got them for myself, or if they came by chance. We may prize a costly jewel for its own worth, but how much the more we count it as a treasure if it is a dear friend’s gift! And now my birthday is over; I have known none like it. How, I wonder, will pass the next, and the next,—or will there be a next? Hush! foolish child, that is not your concern. Take the sweetness and the goodness that God gives *now*, and never trouble about the rest. All will be well, all *must* be well, for He has promised it.”

CHAPTER XVII.

GUISE COURT.

ESTHER was busy in her room on Easter-Tuesday. All the Easter-tide had been bright and happy, but this was the last day of her holidays, and she was thinking which of the many unaccomplished tasks she had set herself she should attempt for that final afternoon and evening. At last she decided she would write French exercises and do translation all the afternoon; if she had time she would read also a few pages of Macaulay, and she would take a long walk in the evening, with Rover for her companion again, and read her new Wordsworth when she came home again, after the candles were lighted; perhaps she might read some to Mrs. King, for the good farmeress loved good poetry and good prose also, albeit she was great in dairy mysteries, and reared fine calves and plump chickens and wonderful little sucking-pigs, that were always anticipated in crackling before they entered on this mundane existence. Poor unconscious things! But some kind of penalty has always to be paid in this world for superior excellence. Esther, however, was not destined to write exercises, or to read "The White Doe of Rylstone," that day. She had only just taken her books down, and opened her dictionary, when she was aware of Miss Smith coming up the gravel-walk, with her toes most elaborately turned out, and her nose most celestially inclined.

The Slade, though it had a front entrance, by a deep porch and a heavy oak door studded with large nails, did not boast of a knocker. In summer-time this front door generally stood wide open, for some one was always about, but thus early in the year it was still, as a rule, closed, and as most people came round by the kitchen-way, it sometimes remained unopened for days together. Miss Smith, of course, would not demean herself by going round to the back-door, *though Cecil would certainly have done so.* She looked round for some instrument of alarm, and seeing a small *dibble that had been used for sowing flower-seeds*, she took

it up, and commenced a vigorous assault upon the oaken door, proceeding very much as if the house were besieged, and she were summoning the garrison to speedy capitulation.

Esther flew down, anxious to stop the battery, for Mrs. King was proud of her oaken door, and did not like to have it scratched, neither would she consent to the modern innovation yclept a knocker. In spite of her intense practicality, Mrs. King had a tinge of the mediæval in her tastes, though she had no idea of it herself, and would certainly not have known how to apply the word had it been spoken in her hearing.

“Good morning, Miss Smith,” said Esther, good humouredly, as she opened the door. She had learned now not to omit the “Miss,” though the waiting-maid, having never forgiven the girl for the unintentional slight, generally called her by her Christian name, and sometimes, when she felt herself in a more exalted frame of mind than usual, addressed her as “*Kendall*.”

“Good morning,” responded Smith, in a tone which seemed to say she would rather, did it not sound so strangely, wish “bad morning.”

“No, I can’t come in ; I’ve promised to lunch along with Mrs. Lees at the Rectory, and I’ve come out of my way to get round here. I declare it’s hot enough for July.” And Miss Smith tried to fan herself with the dibble, but finding that impracticable, resorted to her pocket-handkerchief, which she flirted with a languid grace.

“You had better come in,” said Esther again. She was much improved in her address ; her manners had softened with her character, but she was still abrupt at times, especially when at all nervous ; and Miss Smith, with her air of pretension and her undisguised insolence, invariably made her nervous.

“I mean what I say, and I say what I mean, Kendall,” was the uncourteous rejoinder.

Esther coloured a little, and her fingers trembled as they rested on the huge clumsy latch, but she replied very quietly—

“*Then, Miss Smith, perhaps you will be so good as to say*

what you came to say—that is, I suppose, to deliver Miss Uffadyne's message. I, too, have little time to spare."

"I shall tell your mistress that you wanted to shut the door in my face."

"On the contrary, I wish you would walk in and taste Mrs. King's gooseberry wine, that Miss Uffadyne says is as good as champagne."

"I never drink home-made wines, and I don't see what right you have to be offering me your landlady's hospitality." She called it *horsepitality*! "You are nothing but a lodger here, and Miss Uffadyne's servant, and you oughtn't to be taking upon yourself. Yes, I have a message from your mistress. She desires you will come round to the Chenies at two o'clock. She is going on a expedition, and you are to attend upon her. Mind and be punctual."

And without any ceremony of farewell Miss Smith walked majestically away just as the watchful mistress of the house came to see what "all that chaffering at the front door was about."

"I wonder where Miss Uffadyne is going? and I wonder if Smith really knows?" was Esther's query when she had made her explanations.

"Never you mind, my dear," replied Mrs. King; "you may be sure Miss Cecil means something kind by you. She told me only the week before last that she had never been so satisfied with a schoolmistress before. You are going some pleasant excursion, I dare say. I'll go and see that dinner is not late; and mind you put on your new dress and the hat that we trimmed yesterday, and take your cloak, Esther, child, for the evenings are cool yet, though the days are over-hot for the season. I wonder if you are going by train or in the carriage."

Precisely as the church clock struck two, Esther was walking up the drive at the Chenies, and Cecil's pretty light pony-chaise stood at the door. Cecil herself appeared in the hall, already equipped. "I knew you would be punctual, Esther," was her greeting. "Get in; we shall have a lovely *afternoon for our drive*."

Esther obeyed, and Cecil took the reins. The ponies were

spirited little creatures ; tame animals were Miss Uffadyne's abhorrence. But she managed them capitally, and they knew the familiar hand and the accustomed voice, and discreetly repressed all inclinations to undue friskiness.

"I thought you would like to go with me this afternoon," said Cecil presently, when they were clear of the village and in a green lane which Esther had not explored further than the first mile or so. "I am sure you would like to see the place ; indeed, I fancy I promised to take you the first time I went there myself."

"I dare say I shall like it, the afternoon is so delicious, and it is charming to go so fast in this easy little carriage ; but I do not know whither you are taking me, ma'am."

"Did not Smith deliver her message ?"

"She told me you wished to see me at the Chenies at two o'clock, ready to accompany you in some expedition ; that was all."

"The stupid woman ! I told her to say we were going to Guise Court."

"To Guise Court !" And Esther gave a little scream of delight. "Oh, dear Miss Uffadyne, I have so wished to go there. I wanted so to see my dear Miss Guise's own home."

"Then you will see it by half-past four at the latest, if we do not come to grief with these ponies, who seem to have had rather too much corn. It is a long drive though, and we shall be late back ; but there is a moon, you know, and the roads are not bad. You will not be afraid ?"

"Oh ! no, indeed. I am not timid. Are we not going towards the sea ?"

"Yes. Guise Court is only three miles from the shore, but, excepting on one side which commands the Channel, it is sheltered from sea-winds. The woodlands are beautiful, though scarcely equal perhaps to ours ; but they have more rock, the scenery is bolder, and the Guiseley Cliffs are noted for their rugged grandeur. The Court itself stands gloriously, looking over a wide expanse of sea and land, and the park is lovely."

"How Miss Guise must miss it all this fine spring weather."

Queen Square is a dreary place, though there are far drearier in London."

"I should think so, for it is not squalid, noisy, or superlatively dirty. And Florence Guise being there for a purpose, I hope she makes the best of it. There is nothing like taking present circumstances cheerfully; mend matters if you can, but don't try merely to change them. Changes are not of necessity improvements, remember. Also, when you cannot mend, make up your mind bravely to endure."

All of which was excellent advice, no doubt, and Esther meekly took it as such; but she could not help thinking rather curiously whether Miss Uffadyne had ever put her principles to the test. Had she ever really known trial and perplexity? Had these perfect theories of hers ever been reduced to practice?

Cecil resumed—

"But Florence and my uncle will soon be home again; the law-suit was on the eve of being decided when they wrote last, and there is no doubt of it being in their favour."

"The suit does not concern Guise Court, I think?"

"No; it is a question of other property, which has been unjustly alienated for several generations. It had been so long in one family that Mr. Guise would never have dreamed of disputing the claim, though his father and his grandfather disputed it before him, had not the direct issue of that family failed, and only distant or indirect heirs presented themselves. Moreover, he had discovered some papers, which cleared up the difficulties that had always impeded the cause in my grandfather's time; and it was quite clear to his mind that he could put forth his claim with equity. You know, I suppose, that my brother Oswald is the next heir?"

"I understood so from Miss Guise, and, of course, I have heard it since I came to Chilcombe. People will talk."

"I mean to say that Oswald is heir to the family seat and to the Guiseley estates. Florence will have a large fortune even if this law-suit be not gained, though, by the way, the *expenses will be tremendous*. There is so much delay, and *red-tape*, and nonsense in these matters. Of course, my

uncle makes no claim for interest of money, nor for accumulations of any kind."

"That is very good of him ; but then, Mr. Guise always would be good."

"Yes, he would ; my uncle is a truly religious man. He lives the Christian life far more than he talks about it. His patience and fortitude are admirable."

"Indeed they are. I have never seen him in one of those fearful attacks of pain ; Miss Guise never would let me ; she said I could do no good, and the sight of so much suffering would haunt me afterwards. But I have been with him when it was all over, and he lay quite still and white, like one in a deathly swoon ; the exhaustion was terrible."

"Yes ; and I am afraid some day it will go so far that he cannot rally. Every attack leaves him weaker than a previous one, and either he must conquer the disease, or it will conquer him."

"It seems to me a very mysterious complaint."

"It is ; all sorts of nervous complaints are mysterious, and baffle ordinary medical skill. I think they might be resisted in the first instance by the patient himself. I can quite believe that when people have once given way, and allowed their nerves to get the better of them, it is impossible to rally till the physical strength is restored. I have little sympathy with those people who are for ever complaining of neuralgia, as they call all kinds of indefinite aches and pains, which are induced by their own folly."

"There is something very definite in such torture as Mr. Guise endures," Esther ventured to suggest. She could not keep an accent of reproach out of her tone.

"Precisely," was Cecil's answer ; "but then, in the first place, my uncle injured his constitution by excessive sorrow for the death of his wife, and then he neglected his health, and, if we refuse to obey the laws of health, more or less of suffering is sure to result. Remember that, Esther ! it is as much your duty to take a rational care of your health, as it is honestly to earn your living. I really do believe that *more than half the illnesses in the world might be avoided* — *my own serious illness several years ago, for instance.* I

see now that it was my own fault. There are certain laws of nature which I, partly through ignorance and partly through rashness, violated. I know better now. Given a tolerably sound constitution, and a mind of any strength, and one may keep in health."

Esther thought this sounded harsh and presumptuous, but of course she could not say so. She only hoped she might not fall ill while under the patronage of Miss Uffadyne; and she tried to change the conversation, and reverted again to the subject of the contested estates. Contrary to her wont, Cecil was inclined to be communicative; besides, she knew that Esther must necessarily be cognizant of much that related to the Guises, and there was no harm in speaking of things that were already patent in certain circles.

"Yes," she replied, in answer to some question of Esther's; "the Guiseley estates are only entailed in the male line. And, strange to say, though females cannot themselves inherit, their male children may do so, through them—a very unjust provision of our ancestors, I think. Thus Florence, being of the wrong sex, loses Guise Court, and the Guiseley estates thereto pertaining; also certain lands, not so valuable, in another county. She has, however, a certain fortune; and a charming estate, called Little Guise, some miles away, over the hills there, belongs inalienably to her. My mother was a Guise, the only sister of Mr. Guise, whom you know, and Oswald, her only son, inherits as the nearest of male kin. Of course you know that Florence and my brother are engaged to be married?"

"Yes, Miss Guise told me herself, and I must confess I have been disappointed at not seeing Mr. Uffadyne. I did see him, I suppose, on the evening of my arrival; but I scarcely noticed him, and should not know him now if I met him. Everything, and of course everybody, who belongs to Miss Guise interests me."

"Well, your curiosity will be satisfied soon, I imagine; for I expect Oswald home next week. I should not be surprised to see him this week, indeed, all things considered. I *wonder I did not hear from him this morning*. I cannot say *I quite approve of the engagement*."

"It seems to me that Mr. Uffadyne is a very fortunate person," returned Esther, stiffly. No! Miss Uffadyne might carp and cavil at all the rest of the world, herself included, but she was not going to criticise Florence with impunity. Come what might, Esther would never tolerate *that*. Cecil understood the blunt tone and the quick, impetuous movement, and, being right-minded, in spite of innumerable crotchets, and countless errors of judgment, she respected the emotion, and replied, mildly, "I mean only that I do not approve of *arranged* marriages, nor of marriages between cousins. The engagement was really concluded while both boy and girl were in the nursery. They were brought up for each other, so that neither of them have enjoyed the privilege of selection. It seems to me more a marriage of estates than of hearts."

"Indeed, I am sure—if I may say so much—that Miss Guise is very sincerely attached to Mr. Oswald. I feel quite certain she would not marry as a mere matter of expediency.

"She would not; you are quite right; and my brother loves her very truly, I believe. Still, I wish each one were going to marry some one else; it was never intended that cousins should wed. Besides, people should choose their own partners in life. People make terrible mistakes in this matter of union for life, and find out their blunder too late."

The last sentence was uttered in a low tone, and Cecil seemed speaking more to herself than to her companion. Esther made no answer, but she felt saddened and uneasy on the account of her beloved Miss Guise.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DRIVE HOME.

It was half-past four, as Cecil had predicted, before they reached the Court. The drive was delightful, and the scenery for the last two miles beautiful beyond description. The road gradually ascended, for Guise Court stood high, and the village of Guiseley lay on the slope of a considerable *hill*. *Behind them and around stretched all the rich*

smiling Somersetshire country ; before them were the lawns and woodlands of Guise, almost shut in on two sides by tremendous limestone crags ; and to the right, all heaving and shining in the afternoon sun, the broad, blue waters of the Bristol Channel ; for at the point where Guiseley rises over the sea, the waves lose the muddy aspect which they assume nearer the estuaries of the Severn and the Avon.

“ Ah, this is beautiful ! ” cried Esther, her cheeks flushing, and her deep grey eyes kindling. “ I never, no never, fancied anything like this. It is an earthly paradise.”

“ Not quite,” said Cecil, quietly, and yet pleased with the girl’s enthusiasm.

With all her philosophy she had a certain pride in Guise Court, of which one day her brother would be the master ; and she liked to visit it now and then, and to exhibit its advantages, and hear its praises from the lips of others. If she had been an actual daughter of the home, she could scarcely have cared more about it. Florence herself was not so proud of her beautiful, stately home, though I daresay in her own sweet, quiet way she loved it better ; but then love and not pride was Florence’s predominant characteristic.

The carriage wound slowly up the steep, rocky road, and passed through the lodge-gates, the woman at the lodge recognising one of “ the family,” and dropping the humblest of curtsies. The park was lovely, undulating, woody, and commanding delightful views. The house itself stood on a gentle slope ; it was surrounded by carefully kept gardens, and at some distance behind it rose up the grey limestone crags, their crevices abounding in the white beam tree, the graceful birch, and the vigorous mountain-ash ; while the most luxuriant ivy spread itself over the silvery rock, wrapping the rugged cliff in its shining robes of vivid green, and twining its graceful arms round the decaying stems of ancient thorn, and hanging in gay festoons round the little caves with which the hills abounded. Soon Cecil reined in her ponies before the great hall-door, and the housekeeper appeared in the portico, making reverential acknowledgments of the young lady’s presence. Clearly Miss Uffadyne was a *person of consequence* at Guise Court.

“Well, Mrs. Maxwell,” said Cecil, relinquishing the reins, as a servant came round from the stable, “I am come according to promise, and we shall be glad of some tea as quickly as you can give it to us.” Then to the groom, “Walk those ponies about a little, Sam, till they are cooler ; it is a terrible pull up the hill, but it would have taken us too long to go round by Guiseley. And do not let them have much corn, they are too frisky even now ; they almost pulled my wrists out of joint for the first five miles.”

“Tea is quite ready, Miss Uffadyne, in Miss Guise’s boudoir,” said Mrs. Maxwell. “The urn waits to be carried in. I have had a chicken roasted and a tongue boiled ; for I thought you would be hungry after an early luncheon and such a long drive in this air, that gives every one an appetite. Shall I order the urn in, ma’am ?”

“Yes, do, please. This way, Esther. We will take off our hats at once ; there will be plenty of time to see the gardens before it grows dark.”

And Cecil led the way, while Esther followed through several long carpeted passages and up a broad flight of stairs to Florence’s own bedroom. What a charming nest ! what comfort, what luxury, what elegance ! And to think how contented its mistress had been in her dingy quarters in Queen Square ! The windows opened upon a broad balcony, already gay with flowers, while below lay the velvet-like lawn, with its gay beds, and its antique sun-dial, and a stately peacock unfolding his rich plumage in the golden light of the April afternoon. Beyond were belts of shining evergreens, and terraces half natural, half fashioned by art ; then, far off and below, some wild heath and a stretch of low meadow-land, traversed by flashing water-courses, and gleaming inlets of the tide ; then a strip of red-brown sand, and then the sparkling waves of the Channel, flashing from blue to deep purple under the cloudless evening sky, and glittering, too, as if showers of diamonds rose and fell with every ripple of the sea. Within were soft carpets, fleecy rugs, and delicate white draperies, with pale pink trimmings, an exquisite toilet-set, a few choice books, some appropriate engravings, *and several costly but chaste ornaments.* And

this was Florence Guise's maiden bower. Esther looked with pleasure upon everything the room contained, and she handled the pretty scent-bottles and touched the snowy bed-curtain with an interest and tenderness that almost surprised herself. Coming thus into the midst of Florence's possessions was like being with her again, and a great gush of love seemed to spring up in her heart, an overflowing love towards the earthly friend to whom she owed so much—so very much more than she ever could repay.

Cecil and Esther had tea together in the boudoir, and then they went through the house, and Cecil explained the pictures, and showed the rare cabinets, and all the choice things they contained, and the wonderful dragon-china, which Esther by this time had learned to appreciate ; and she told the legends concerning the armour in the hall, and went through the story of a certain lord of Guise whose marvellous deeds were commemorated in fresco and in stained windows, as well as in the chronicles laid up in the family muniment-room. By this time the shades of evening were falling, and small leisure remained for seeing the gardens. They would hurry through the rose-garden, and the acacia-plot, and come round by the great terrace, Cecil said : there was not time for more ; but she wished to see the purple magnolias and the double peach-blossoms, which Mrs. Maxwell said were flowering so beautifully that year. But one never does a thing of this kind half so quickly as one anticipates, and by the time they reached the hall-door again the sun had sunk below the horizon, the ruddy tint was dying out from the fleecy clouds high up in the zenith, and a faint streak of silver showed upon the sea.

"Quick, Esther," said Cecil, taking out her watch, and straining her eyes to catch the minute hand. "It is but a young moon after all, and it will be nearly dark in those shady lanes. I daresay the carriage is ready. Where is Mrs. Maxwell, I wonder?"

As Cecil spoke, Mrs. Maxwell's imposing figure might be seen emerging from the gloom of an inner passage, and by her side was a tall gentleman. A strip of moonlight lay *across the hall*, and as the housekeeper and her companion

stood in it, Esther knew that the gentleman was Oswald Uffadyne. She had seen him but for a single moment on the night of her arrival at Chilcombe, and she had, as she supposed, straightway forgotten what manner of man he was ; yet in the dim, transient moonlight, catching sight only of his figure and his profile, she recognised him perfectly.

Her doubts, if she had any, were quickly dispelled, for, before Cecil could exclaim or ask a question, the young man stepped forward with a merry greeting, asking his sister what she meant by gallevanting about the country at that time of night.

“Where did you spring from, Oswald ?”

“From Mrs. Maxwell’s room.”

“Nonsense.”

“I assure you I speak truth ; ask Mrs. Maxwell.”

“You were not in the house an hour ago.”

“Because I was on the road to it ; a body cannot be in two places at once.”

“Seriously, Oswald, where did you come from ?”

“Seriously, I arrived this afternoon from town soon after you left home. They told me where you had gone, and I got some dinner, and mounted old Jack, and came after you. I should have been here an hour ago only Jack fell lame on the other side of Dunsey Brook. We came by the ford, and I fancy something got into his foot. I had to lead him up this confounded hill. I must leave him here till to-morrow, and I shall have the pleasure of driving your ladyship and Miss Kendall home.”

“Do you know, Oswald, I think I would rather drive those ponies myself. They are mettlesome creatures, and they are used to my hand.”

“To think I, who can tool along Black Bess and Phosphorus, should not be able to hold in a pair of ponies not much bigger than cats.”

“Of course you are able, but you are a little rash, and your driving sometimes frightens me ; and these creatures have odd whimsies, and they are larger and stronger than *you imagine.*”

"I shall manage them well enough."

"Very well ; you know I am not nervous, only I warn you to be careful ; it would not be agreeable to be tumbled out in the middle of one of those long lanes, half way between here and Chilcombe."

"I will engage to drive you into Chilcombe without a spill."

There was no more to be said about it : they were losing time, and Cecil was anxious to get home ; she was later than she had intended, and anything approaching to want of punctuality in her own movements always annoyed and irritated her. She hurried Esther upstairs for her hat, and when she came down again the carriage was at the door. Sam was holding the ponies' heads ; Cecil was seated, and Mr. Uffadyne was waiting to hand her in.

The ponies evidently were in high feather ; they had had a rest and a good feed, and they knew they were going home. They dashed down the hill somewhat impetuously, to Esther's secret terror ; but, seeing that Cecil was quite calm, she felt reassured, and gave herself up to the pleasure of the moonlight drive. Cecil and Oswald talked incessantly for the first half of the way. The law-suit was decided, Oswald said ; it had been decided some days before, and he had meant to write, but he had been prevented, and the Guises were victorious. Mr. Guise was rather poorly, for the excitement had been too much for him ; but Florence was quite well, as bright and sweet as ever, and longing vehemently to be at Guise Court again ; glad that the wearying, expensive suit was over, but not very much rejoiced to be the mistress of so many more thousands than were hers originally.

"No, Florence would never care much about mere money," said Cecil ; and then the brother and sister conversed in a low tone, and Esther tried not to listen. She felt very happy, for in less than a fortnight, if all went well, she would see her dear Miss Guise once more. Oswald kept his word to the letter, inasmuch as he drove safely into and through Chilcombe ; but just as he reached the Chenies *gates*, a *stray* sheep that had been lying down under the *fence* jumped up, and rushed across the road, under the

feet of the ponies, who were turning swiftly into the drive.

A jerk, a quick swerve, a sudden lashing out of Oswald's whip, and everybody lay upon the ground, and the chaise was on its side ! Oswald and Cecil were up again directly ; but Esther, when she tried to rise, felt a sharp pain in her foot, that forced a cry from her : she turned sick and fainted, and had to be carried into the house.

It was no great accident after all. Cecil had a slight bruise on one arm ; Oswald had a scratch on his cheek, where, as he said, he had kissed the gravel ; and Esther had a sprained ankle, that was all.

But sprains, though not often serious, may be very troublesome ; and the doctor when he came said that Esther must not attempt to stir for several days at least. So Oswald went down to Mrs. King's to explain her non-appearance ; and early next morning Cecil hurried to the school, and proclaimed an extension of the Easter holidays. Esther's scholars professed to be very sorry for their governess's accident ; but I dare say they were not quite so much troubled as they might have been, had they not gained a whole week's holiday through the sprained ankle and its consequences.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT THE CHENIES.

WHEN Cecil came back from the village she found Esther extremely feverish and unwell ; the pain she suffered from her injured ankle had kept her awake nearly all the night, and the prospect of being detained from her work and from her home for an indefinite time weighed upon her spirits so heavily as materially to affect her physical condition. She had enjoyed the breathing-time which the Easter recess afforded her ; but she was feeling quite ready to go back to her duties, and even anxious to see some of the children again ; and in the interval of vacation she had planned several *improvements in the classes*, and she was eager to carry them

out, and try how they worked practically. Her last thoughts before the accident occurred had been something like this:—

“ Well, now my holiday is over ; how short it seems, and yet how thoroughly I have enjoyed it. And this afternoon has been grand. How kind of Miss Uffadyne to take me out with her, and treat me just like a friend ! If I had been her equal she could not have been kinder. How nice it has all been, and how funny that Mr. Oswald should turn up at Guise Court of all places ! I think I shall like him. He must be very good and clever, or Florence would not care about him. Dear, sweet Florence ! and to think I shall so soon see her again. And to think, too, that the mistress of that beautiful place should have called me her friend ! Oh, when I look back no later than last October ! Thank God ! thank God ! He did it all. He sent me Florence Guise. Now, to-morrow labour begins again, and I am glad of it. I really want to be at my post ; and I feel sure that way of teaching geography will answer. I should like to give extra lessons to Mary Murrell and Anne Culverwell, they are so anxious to improve. I must talk to Miss Cecil about it. She likes these girls, I know, as she always does like people who try to help themselves. But what a blessing to be able to help one’s self. I could not help myself, strive as I would, a year ago. I do not think we thank God enough for opportunities, and how seldom we profit by them to the utmost. I will be more earnest than ever. I will begin to-morrow, and work with redoubled zeal. I think, too, I might rise half an hour earlier now that the mornings are so light and so warm, and six half-hours make three whole hours in a week. Three hours for real hard study. How much I may accomplish before the dark mornings come again. I will begin to-morrow ; I will ask Jem to call me when he goes to the cows. I hope I shall not be too sleepy, but I do feel very tired to-night.”

And just then came the shock, and Esther only knew that she was lying on the ground under the hedge, and that she *must* get up again ; and then that getting up was out of the *question*. And the next thing she remembered was lying on *the sofa in the dining-room*, and feeling that water was being

ashed in her face, and that several people were around her ; also that when she tried to move an almost unbearable pain seemed to shoot through her whole frame, and she could only be still with her eyes shut, and try to make no moan. And then the doctor came, and in handling the foot he hurt her very much, and but that she struggled against her weakness she would have fainted again when the bandaging was over. Oh ! if she could only be got home ! it would be so much easier to bear it all patiently, she thought. If she were but in her own room, with the rose-sprays tapping at the oriel window, and Mrs. King coming in and out, and Mercy, the Slade Farm maid, to wait upon her ! Miss Cecil was very kind, but she did not seem like a person who would have much sympathy with illness of any sort. And a sprained ankle was not much, though it gave so much pain, and made her for the time so very helpless. And Miss Amelia Matilda Smith had looked her disdain as she lay on the sofa the night before, struggling for fortitude ; and she had brought her her breakfast with an air, and gone out of the room with a sniff, and banged the door behind her. The prospect of being waited on by such an Abigail was far from agreeable, and Esther only hoped her own temper would not fail her in the trial.

When Cecil came back she desired that Esther should be got up and brought into her dressing-room, where was a very comfortable sofa, eminently fitted for invalids, and Smith was summoned to assist at her toilet. But Esther pleaded—" Might not Nancy come ? She only wanted a helping-hand now and then, and she would rather not give more trouble than was needful."

" But Nancy is clumsy-handed," replied Cecil ; " she will jar your nerves terribly. It is not her business to dress people ; her vocation is undoubtedly in the scullery-line ; she is grand at pots, and pans, and kitchen fire-irons, and when I see her polishing the dish-covers I respect her, for she does it with a will, and in a certain sense scientifically. But I must confess—and I am no fine lady—I should not like Nancy's hands about me."

Esther did not reply, but her colour rose, and Cecil, feeling

her pulse, was rather dismayed at its rapidity. "What is the matter, child?" she asked, abruptly. "You are worrying yourself about something or somebody. You will put yourself into a downright fever if you do not take care. What is it?"

"May I say just what I am thinking?" said Esther, her eyes shining more and more, and the colour still deepening upon her cheek.

"Of course you may. Out with it!"

"If Nancy is ever so clumsy she will jar my nerves less than Miss Smith, who will not like the trouble of waiting upon me."

"When I give orders to my servants, I expect them to be obeyed, without reference to trouble," said Cecil, rather haughtily. "No, child, I am not vexed with *you*, but Smith tries my patience sorely; she is always giving herself airs, and conducting herself unpleasantly. I have a great mind to send her adrift, only she was so good to me three years ago."

"Oh, pray don't!" cried Esther, much concerned. "I should never forgive myself if I did her any harm. She knows no better, you see, and if you, her mistress, can put up with her, I ought not to mind in the least, however disagreeable she may be. Her manner cannot really hurt me, you know."

"Certainly not, and you should accustom yourself not to care for that sort of conduct. Don't be *sensitive*, Esther. Learn to take hard words, and sharp words, and sour looks, even when you do not deserve them. But just now you are, perhaps, not equal to *Miss Smith*, as I believe she calls herself downstairs and in the village; indeed, I am credibly informed that she, instead of affixing her proper autograph to her letters, signs herself 'Yours very truly, Miss Smith.' So you shall have Nancy for your lady-in-waiting; only prepare yourself for some rough handling and for a little stupidity. I will send her to you, for Dr. Dalton said you *would* be better on the sofa than in bed. After all she will *be more efficient* than Smith, for she is stronger, and you *will need her help* in crossing to my room."

Nancy came, and was not nearly so clumsy as might have been anticipated ; but when Esther, leaning on her shoulder and wrinkling her brows with pain, tried to hop towards the door, Nancy caught her up in her arms, saying, "Laws, miss ! I'm not going to let you go hop-scotching o' that way. You're no more than a child in my arms ; I've carried many a heavier weight afore now. Don't be frightened, I won't let you fall ; I am as strong as *Surklouise* !"

Whom Esther imagined to be some Chilcombe giant with whom she was as yet unacquainted, the fact being that Nancy, having once heard something of the exploits of the hero of the Augean stables, remembered the story of his fabulous strength, but, as was her custom upon every favourable opportunity, transposed his name. She always called Judas Iscariot Judas *Ixariot* ; she sometimes discoursed about Ahab and Jebezel ; she came down from Cecil's Bible-class on Sunday evening, and remarked that the lesson had been about the family at Betsy-ny, and that next week they would have the "Pallible of the Mower" ; so that it was not at all remarkable that, when launched upon the unfamiliar sea of classic fable, she should pronounce *Hercules* in a fashion peculiar to herself.

Esther had no idea what she meant, for she knew very little about the son of Alcmena ; but she felt confidence in the brawny arms, and in the good-will that bore her so lightly to Miss Uffadyne's dressing-room, and laid her down upon the sofa as deftly as if she had been a three-years child, instead of a tall, slim young woman past her seventeenth birthday. And presently Cecil came to her with a cup of chocolate and some biscuits, and insisted upon their being taken ; and then she arranged her patient as comfortable as circumstances permitted, and, after providing her with a book of travels, left her to the enjoyment of unaccustomed leisure. But the hours wore away slowly, the time hung heavily on her hands ; she soon tired of her book, her foot pained her still, her head ached ; she was weary, and yet she could not sleep. She heard the clock strike, and it seemed as if the day could never have an end. She felt almost like a child, inclined to *cry for home*, and then she thought that, like a fretful child,

she deserved to be whipped for quarrelling with the mercies of her lot. Cecil had been so kind ; the doctor had assured her that if she obeyed orders her ankle would soon be well ; she was waited upon and ministered to—even her fancies, as in the matter of Nancy, were humoured ; she lay upon a luxurious couch in a pretty room, a brisk little fire was burning, because she had complained of feeling chilly, and Cecil herself, before leaving her, had covered her with an eider-down quilt. She ought to be very thankful, she told herself again and again ; if the accident had happened during her old Queen Square experiences, how different her surroundings would have been ! how little kindness she would have received ! how few allowances would have been made for her ! how much she might have suffered for want of the simplest attention ! And she would be thankful, and try to feel quite happy, since the same Father who had sent her the pleasant holiday time, had sent her also this brief season of pain and trial.

But scold and school herself as she would Esther could not succeed in feeling cheerful, and as the morning passed into noon she began to fear that she was more seriously indisposed than any one had imagined. Her head ached fiercely ; it was not easy in any position, and she was alternately hot and shivering. For one five minutes she drew the quilt round her, and wished she were nearer to the fire ; the next she tossed off the coverlet, gasping and longing for an open window. And yesterday she had been so well and blithe, so ready, as she imagined, for anything that might betide, save only going back to the old grey life in London.

It seemed an age before Cecil came back, and she was concerned to find Esther no better.

“ I know you are worrying yourself,” she said, somewhat sharply, “ and I am surprised at you ; I really thought you were stronger-minded. The accident has happened, and we must make the best of it. What is it you want ? ”

Esther could have answered—“ I want to go home. I am *desolate here* ; ” but she only burst into tears.

“ Oh, dear, dear ! ” said Cecil, in audible soliloquy, “ what

shall I do with her? I am afraid to give her wine or sal volatile, she is so feverish; and I hate the very name of sal volatile. What a tiresome child it is; and she would do so well if only she would behave herself sensibly. Leave off crying, Esther, directly."

But to obey was not in Esther's power; true it is she choked down her sobs determinately for several minutes, and kept back her tears. It was not for long; the struggle was past her strength, weakened as she was by pain and loss of rest; and just as Cecil was going to praise her for the effort she was making she burst out almost with a shriek, and fell into a fit of such hearty convulsive weeping that Cecil stood aghast, and for once in her life felt herself unequal to an emergency.

"Esther, I am ashamed of you," said Miss Uffadyne at length. "Do you know that you are acting very sinfully? You are wilfully giving way to emotions that injure the health. I am ready to do everything for you as if you were my sister, but if you persist in this ridiculous, this very naughty behaviour, I have nothing to say to you. I must leave you till you come to your senses."

And she was turning away when Oswald, who had been standing several minutes at the open door, came to her side, saying—

"What is all this, Cecil? Is Miss Kendall worse?"

"Miss Kendall is a simpleton; she is making herself worse as fast as she can. She will be in a high fever directly. Why, she is laughing now. Esther, have you gone crazy?"

"Do you not see that Miss Kendall is hysterical?" said Oswald, gravely. "You are adding fuel to fire, Cecil."

"Hysterical, indeed! You know my opinion of hysterics, —another name for tempers and selfishness. What has she got to go into hysterics about? The pain is not so very bad, and there are no bones broken."

"It is of no use to discuss the question now; give me the eau de Cologne, and throw open the window." And gravely as if he had been an M.R.C.S. he dipped a handkerchief in cold water, and laid it upon Esther's burning brow, while

he poured eau de Cologne upon her palms and rubbed her hands gently.

"Do try to control yourself, because it is really bad for you," said Oswald, kindly. "You make me feel miserable, for it is all my fault."

"Oh, no, no!" sobbed Esther.

"Yes. If I had been more careful we should not have been upset; I was holding the reins very carelessly when the ponies shied. You must forgive me, Miss Kendall, and please try and get well as fast as ever you can. I shall feel like a culprit till I see you running downstairs again as nimbly as I saw you run last night at Guise Court, when we were making haste to start. There, that is better. Do you like music?"

"Very much indeed."

"Then I will play for your delectation; I should not wonder if I played you to sleep."

There was a small pianoforte in the room, and suiting the action to the word Oswald sat down and began to extemporise a sort of song without words, through which ran a strain that might have been an actual lullaby. Cecil looked on, scarcely knowing whether to reprove or encourage him. But certainly he had been successful where she had entirely failed, and—well there was no reason why Oswald should not be kind to one in whose welfare Florence was very deeply interested. Florence herself would approve, she was certain, so why should she interfere? So she took up her work and sat down behind Esther's sofa, while Oswald's fingers wandered softly over the piano keys in sonata and reverie and symphony till Cecil herself began to feel drowsy—a state against which she always protested between the hours of six a.m. and eleven p.m. As for Esther, she listened awhile to the sweet, soothing strains with pleasure; then she began to think about yesterday's visit to Guise Court, about the conversation she had had with Cecil, about the sea, about Queen Square, and Biddy O'Flanigan, till her thoughts became confused and jumbled up into a strange *dream, in which she was watching the sunset from the terrace in front of the Court, and talking earnestly to Biddy,*

who had forgotten to cook Mr. Oswald's dinner, while Mrs. Hellicar was philosophising after Cecil's fashion, and Cecil herself, in a dirty gown, was nursing the Queen Square baby, and cuffing Tommy very vigorously. Then she awoke to find herself at the Chenies, Cecil busy with her accounts, and the music still going on ; and again she slept, and this time profoundly and dreamlessly ; and when once more she opened her eyes, and began to collect her faculties, it was evening ; the piano was closed, the account books were put away, and she was alone in the room.

She was not long alone, however ; she was no sooner wide awake than Cecil glided in from her bedroom, and praised her for looking so much better, and asked her if she were not ready for her dinner.

"Does your head ache now ?" she inquired, gently.

Oswald had been reading her a lecture while her patient slept.

"Scarcely at all," replied Esther. "It has a light sort of feeling ; but the pain is gone. A good sleep always cures my headaches."

"You want something to eat, that is why your head feels light. I will ring for your tray."

Miss Smith, with a subdued air, and mild resignation in her countenance, appeared to answer the summons, and Cecil gave the order—

"Miss Kendall's dinner directly."

"Yes, ma'am," sighed forth Amelia Matilda, with the look of a martyr.

It was a terrible humiliation to her to have to carry that small tray upstairs ; but then she was not exactly wishing for a dismissal, and she knew full well that her mistress was not a young lady who would be trifled with ; so, like a wise woman, she swallowed the indignity with the best grace she could, and submitted herself to the inevitable.

A very nice little dinner soon arrived, looking specially inviting on the snowy damask napkin ; and Esther was not loth to do justice to it. And she felt very much the better for her *repast*, and her ankle was so easy that she thought *it must be nearly well*, and, being alone, she rose to walk to

the window in order to test its powers. They were quickly enough tested. At the first step the whole limb gave way, and the sharp thrill of pain brought the perspiration out. She could only fall back upon the sofa, gather up the injured foot, and resolve not to stir again without permission. For an hour the aching was almost intolerable, and she paid dearly for her venture; but towards bed-time the pain abated, and she had a good night. And so passed the first day at the Chenies.

CHAPTER XX.

LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP.

AFTER that day Esther did not suffer much, if only she would content herself to lie on her sofa, and not attempt to walk. Dr. Dalton told her that no real harm was done; in a little while the ankle would be as strong as ever, and no evil consequences would result from the accident; only she must implicitly obey orders, and *be patient*. But it was hard work to Esther to be patient; she had been used to so active a life that enforced idleness was pain and misery to her, and she envied Nancy, who stumped upstairs and downstairs, and talked about walking to Shepperton and back, the nearest town, without resting and without being tired.

Thus a whole week wore away, and Esther's scholars were still keeping holiday. It was a dull week, Esther thought—the dullest on the whole she ever remembered; certainly the dullest she had passed since coming to Chilcombe. She had plenty of books, and Mary Murrell and Anne Culverwell, her favourite pupils, were allowed to visit her. Mrs. King also came to see her, and told her how much she and “father” missed her; and she brought news of the garden, and of a brood of chickens hatched; and the old duck was sitting on twelve eggs; and the Alderney had a calf; and Esther's special pet, the tortoise-shell cat, had kittens, two of them like herself, and Mrs. King did not care to drown *any of the brood till Esther had seen them all and made her choice, for the one saved was to be her own especial property.*

At the end of that week Cecil began to be uneasy about Esther; she was still disabled, and Dr. Dalton said she must keep to the sofa for at least ten more days, or he would not answer for a perfect and permanent cure; but the unusual confinement and want of exercise were beginning to tell upon the general health, and a look of delicacy began to steal over Esther's face, her hands grew thin and white, and the restlessness which at first rather provoked Cecil had given way to languor.

Now Cecil, with all her maxims, and her store of concentrated wisdom, had one womanly weakness—a weakness, too, which saved her from being a really unamiable person. She was impulsive in her likes and dislikes, and, if it came into her head or into her heart to care for any person, she cared very much indeed, and flung herself into an ardour of intimacy without greatly concerning herself about its eligibility. I must do her the justice to say, however, that she was never attracted by unworthy objects, that those to whom, as Oswald said, “she *took*,” were generally well worth taking to, and, to crown all, she was in no wise subject to the infirmity popularly called “falling in love.” Cecil Uffadyne had an intense contempt for girls who troubled themselves about the other sex; she loved her brother very truly, but men in general she only tolerated, or respected according to the work they did in the world. She had no vocation for matrimony she always said, and she intended to be a very comfortable, happy, useful old maid; and if she possibly missed some kinds of felicity, she would secure freedom from many certain anxieties and sorrows, and from the incessant worry of married life; “for such a life,” she argued, “must be a worry. There is the will of another to defer to; there are his whims to be studied, his desires, however unreasonable, to be complied with: liberty is lost, and peace is unattainable. No, no! let those who will strive after and accept matronly dignities and prerogatives, the calm, quiet, self-contained life of a spinster for me. I have lived to be three-and-twenty, and never yet has my heart beaten quickly because I heard a certain footstep, or *my pulses bounded* because I listened to a voice that was to—

me as sweetest music. I never yet saw the man whom I could condescend to love only moderately, and if I did marry it would be as well to love immoderately ; nothing else could make married life tolerable, I should say. But to submit myself to any man, to merge my whole being into another's being, to lose my identity, as it were—for a married woman is only a part of her husband, and can have no separate existence while he lives—to give up my freedom, it is not to be thought of ! May I walk to the end of my days 'in maiden meditation fancy free !' ”

But meanwhile Cecil had several times been passionately in love with girls and women. She had conceived a profound attachment for the English governess in the French *pension* where she had been chiefly educated ; and she had wanted to bring Miss Parker to Chilcombe to live with her always, and share all that she possessed, and be to her a sister and bosom friend for evermore. But Miss Parker, finding that she had the option, came not unnaturally to elect as her bosom friend another, who also desired to assume the obligations of a husband. She was tired, poor thing, of fourteen years' hard teaching and a life of dependency, and she had no objection to a kind-hearted, middle-aged widower without children, whom every one respected, and who told her that he loved her and would make her as happy as the day was long, if only she would become his wife. Bessie Parker wisely consented ; but Cecil Uffadyne was terribly aggrieved, and accused her friend of having broken faith with her.

Cecil had had two other attachments, both of which came to a premature conclusion. Helen Dalton, the doctor's young sister, had been Cecil's ideal, and the very idol of her heart ; but then she turned out to be somebody else's ideal, and the idol of a prosperous, excellent young physician, and poor Helen degraded herself by committing lawful matrimony with the first man who asked her hand. And Marian Orme, who seemed so high-minded that Cecil was content to kneel humbly at her footstool, proved herself no better and no wiser. A handsome young baronet, with an unblemished *reputation* and large property, bore her away one morning in *his travelling chariot* as “my lady,” and Cecil began to hate

the men, who stole from her the first affections of her friends and left her desolate and forsaken. For of course she was not going to obey the injunctions of these weak-minded, fickle young women, who with one voice replied to her reproaches, "Dear Cecil, go thou and do likewise."

For two whole years Cecil had had no well-beloved friend, and she had almost resolved never again to hamper herself with a very close intimacy. From the first she had taken an interest in Esther; she had found her docile, industrious, insatiate in the pursuit of knowledge, possessing also much independence of thought, and that vigour of mind in which Cecil herself so much delighted, and which she prided herself on sedulously cultivating. She had been charmed with the way in which Esther took up her work, teaching so thoroughly, evincing so much discretion, and striving with all her powers to render herself more worthy of the confidence reposed in her. And she had helped the young schoolmistress very materially; she had so spoken of her in the village as to impress the minds of the parents of the children with Miss Kendall's superiority and claims to respect. She had assisted her also in her studies, and given her French lessons, which were pleasant alike to teacher and to pupil; and she had fallen into the habit of conversing with Esther very much, as if she were her equal, though Esther never forgot her position, and never presumed on Miss Uffadyne's familiarity.

Still, till Esther actually came and lived a week, not only in the house, but in her own dressing-room, it never occurred to Cecil to put her in the place for two years vacant in her affections. She was vexed at first with Esther, because at the outset she seemed to give way, and then because she did not seem quite happy in the comfortable quarters provided for her. Do what she would Cecil felt sure she pined for her regular classes and for the Slade Farm. But as the week drew to its close, and Esther began to look frail and worn, Cecil felt a sudden gushing up of love towards her. She wanted to have her all to herself; she felt jealous of Mrs. King, and she longed to fold the girl in her arms, and tell her how much she cared for her, and how happy they might make *each other*. But a certain reserve or shyness in Esther's

manner checked the effusion to which Cecil was prompted, and she contented herself with showering upon her guest all kinds of gentle and loving attentions. Cecil never did anything by halves, and Esther was fairly astonished at the consideration with which she was treated, and the petting she received. She began to imagine that she must be really very ill, or that so much fuss would not be made about her.

One morning, after Dr. Dalton had gone, Cecil came to Esther, her face quite radiant with pleasure. "Esther," she cried, at once, "you are to come down into the drawing-room at once ; the doctor says so."

Esther uttered an exclamation of surprise, for she knew perfectly well that she could not stand without pain, and not a quarter of an hour before the doctor had cautioned her against putting her foot to the ground.

"Not to walk down, of course," continued Cecil ; "you must be carried. Yes, indeed, you must consent, Esther ; the doctor says you will be better if you change the air and change the scene a little. There will be more to amuse you downstairs, and in a day or two, perhaps, you may take a drive in the pony-chaise ; you will not be afraid ? "

"Not if you will drive."

"Poor Oswald ! what would he say if he heard you, Esther ? He considers himself a most accomplished Jehu ; and I must say I have never known him come to grief before. It was scarcely his fault, the light was very uncertain, and who could foresee that animal jumping up and startling the ponies, just turning in at the gate, too ? It was fortunate it was not in one of those dark lanes, where there is not a house of any kind for a mile together. But how was it your foot was hurt, Esther ? I bruised my arm, and grazed my right elbow, and Oswald's hands and face were scratched."

"I think there was a large stone in the ditch where I fell ; but I know my foot was doubled under me. I had no idea I was hurt till I tried to rise."

"Ah, well ! it was an unfortunate business, for you I *mean*, though it was very fortunate for me, keeping you here *so long*."

"I have been so afraid that I was a great trouble to you, and a great nuisance, occupying your dressing-room so long."

"Nothing of the sort. I shall miss you sadly when you go away; you are a girl after my own heart, Esther, and I owe Flossy a thousand thanks for sending you here."

"I am so glad; but I am sure I vexed you very much the morning after the accident occurred. I know I must have seemed very weak and foolish, but I had been in so much pain all night, and I was so worn out that I had no command over myself. I felt very much ashamed all the time, but I could no more help crying and sobbing than I could help breathing."

"Of course you could not! Esther, I am afraid you find me a very stern, unlovable person. I am afraid people generally take me to be hard-hearted."

"They say you are strong-minded."

"Ah, I know what that means applied to a woman; it means that you have any amount of rectitude, and fortitude, and energy; also that you are ungentle, even unkind, uncharitable in your judgments, unloving and unlovable, and altogether unfeminine!"

"Oh, Miss Cecil, no one thinks that of you."

"If they do they wrong me, though that does not matter much. I care very little about the gratuitous opinions of people who are no more to me than just fellow-creatures. But, Esther, I hope you do not think I cannot feel affection, and manifest it too, if only I find the right person to love."

"Indeed, I think nothing of the sort. I am sure you love your brother and Miss Guise; and you have been very, very kind to me ever since I came here. I have been thinking, since I lay here, how much I owe to you. How much you have taught me! What an amount of time you have spent upon me! If only God will give me health and strength, I need never be dependent again. I can always get my own living respectably."

"Always. And I think it was the indomitable perseverance and spirit of independence you have displayed ever since I knew you that first won my esteem, though it is only *of late that I have regarded you with affection.*"

"Have I won your esteem—and affection?" responded Esther, gratefully. And looking into the animated brown eyes that were looking into hers so kindly, she felt that it was indeed the truth; Cecil Uffadyne was not the woman to make insincere professions of any kind. Strange as it all seemed, Esther felt that she really was cared for by this new friend whom she had respected and admired and also feared; she could not comprehend it, but she felt pleased and happy. It is always pleasant to be appreciated, nearly always charming to be loved. Somehow it did not seem half so unnatural to Esther to be loved by the beautiful, girlish Florence, as by the brilliant, sensible, sagacious Cecil; but she could only smile gratefully, and wonder secretly how it came about. Presently she said, "When will Miss Guise be here?"

"In less than a week; they are very busy at the Court getting things in readiness. Do you want to see Florence?"

"Oh, Miss Cecil, yes! My first friend—the friend without whom I should still have been a miserable, ignorant girl, without whom I should never have had you for my friend."

"I like you for your constancy, Esther. I believe that you will never forget Florence Guise, that she will have the first place in your affections till——"

"Till when? I do not think she will ever be dethroned."

"Do you not? Then you never mean to marry?"

"I never thought of that. Ah! that would be a thing of itself apart, of course. That would be *the* love I suppose, but Florence would still be my dearest friend, to whom I owed a life-long gratitude."

"Esther, do you ever think about love, about love as connected with marriage?"

"Yes, I do sometimes, not often. But when I do think about it I think very deeply, I believe."

"And what do you think? May I have some of your thoughts?"

"I think, Miss Uffadyne, that love, if it be of the right sort, must be the most beautiful thing in the world. There can be nothing like it."

"What do you mean by the right sort?"

"The sort that would give up everything for the sake

of the one it loved ; that would sacrifice self, and yet think it no sacrifice ; that would resign all earth can give for the one beloved one, and, if need were, go on loving faithfully and silently and apart as long as life should last. It should be a love perfectly constant, yet never vexing with its constancy ; such a love that, if it were God's will that the two who loved each other should never marry, they would still love each other wholly and without change, knowing that in the world to come they would still be united, though the union would be purer and higher than any earthly union could be. I read these lines the other day, and I copied them, because they expressed so completely what I was thinking :—

“ ‘ And I methinks could let all dear rights go,
 Fond duties melt away like April snow,
 And sweet, sweet hopes, that took a life to weave,
 Vanish like gossamers of autumn eve.
 Nay, sometimes seems it I could even bear
 To lay down humbly this love-crown I wear ;
 Steal from my palace helpless, hopeless, poor,
 And see another queen it at the door,
 If only that the king had done no wrong,
 If this my palace, where I dwelt so long,
 Were not defiled by falsehood entering in.
 There is no loss but change, no death but sin,
 No parting save the slow, corrupting pain
 Of murdered faith that cannot live again.’ ”

And it seemed to me that love, to be indeed true and of the real, right kind, must be capable even of this. Do you not think so ? ”

“ I scarcely know, Esther ; I never loved. I never have had even a passing fancy for any one. I have loved only women. And yet I think I could bear anything or do anything for the woman friend whom I truly loved and who also loved me. But women even when they are faithful to their lovers are faithless to each other.”

“ Do you think so ? Surely not always. You, for instance, would be true, I feel assured ; so would Miss Guise.”

“ I should be true, Esther, if I know myself ; but I should *not like to say for Florence*. She is expecting to become

a married woman, and her husband will be first. As her lover, I suppose he is first now."

"Of course he is," replied Esther, warmly; "he ought to be. No woman should have any friend even of her own sex who can compare with her husband on the ground of being loved."

"You would be like the rest then, Esther? If you had a friend who loved you ever so dearly, and whose affection you returned, you would give her up if that other love came in your way?"

"Indeed I would not; I should not love her less, but another person more. And it would be so different. If for this cause a man or woman shall leave father and mother, and cleave to one whom the Bible says shall be another self, surely one in the same sense leaves all other loves and friendships."

"Esther, tell me truly—I have no right perhaps to question you, but I ask you as a favour to tell me from the bottom of your heart whether there is any one towards whom you have this love you are talking about. Are you saying what you have *felt*?"

"Oh, no; how could it be? I am only just growing out of childhood. I only think what love ought to be as I believe, and I fancy that so I should myself love if ever I found any one whom I could wish to spend all my life with. For the present at least I do not want to find that person; I would rather be simple Esther Kendall, free to give my whole heart to the work that lies before me and about me. There is plenty to do in the world without falling in love."

"Right, Esther, right! To live without love would, I grant, be indeed a bitter lot; but one may be quite as happy without that particular kind of love as with it, I am well assured. The sense of duties performed, of kindnesses exchanged, of benefits conferred, is quite enough to make any reasonable person happy, even if he or she miss that exclusive sentimental affection which is called *par excellence* 'love.' But when I have said this to others I have been told, 'She *jests at wounds* who never had a scar.'"

"Do you know, I was thinking so. But for myself——"

“Yes, go on ; what about yourself?”

“I would rather at present have nothing to do with love, for I should be so afraid that I, being only very young, might make a mistake—that is, mistake a mere dream for the reality, a mere fancy for the thing itself. And it must be terrible to go on dreaming awhile, and then awake and know it was but a dream.”

“Terrible indeed, Esther! Take my advice : be content with the love of your own sex, and leave all other loves alone.”

“For the present I certainly will, Miss Uffadyne.”

CHAPTER XXI.

TRAGEDY OR COMEDY.

AND so Esther was carried downstairs and comfortably established on the sofa in the drawing-room. The first day the change tired her, but she slept better that night than she had slept since leaving her own room at the Slade, and the next morning she rose refreshed and inspirited, feeling quite herself again, save that the troublesome ankle would not permit her to be moving about at will. Even that, however, felt stronger, and Dr. Dalton declared it to be going on so satisfactorily that in another week it might be gently exercised : in the meantime she must still keep to the sofa and remain obedient to rule.

Since the day when Oswald had played her to sleep she had seen little of him ; he had been very much at Guise Court, going early and returning late, full of business, Cecil said, and seeing many people on behalf of his uncle, who was only too glad to find his heir really interesting himself about the estate, which would one day be his own—a day not very distant, Mr. Guise believed, for he felt that his health was declining apace, and symptoms were disclosing themselves which convinced him that the time of his departure was near at hand. He was anxious to be at Guise once more, but he was very thankful that at last Oswald took

from him much of the burden of responsibility, now grown too heavy for his weak and weary frame.

On the third day of Esther's installation in the drawing-room Oswald left for the Court very early in the morning, without leaving word at what time in the evening he might be expected home, and Cecil gave orders for a late dinner, believing that he would be detained till beyond his usual time. She and Esther lunched quietly in the middle of the day, and they were nearly ready for five-o'clock tea, when Oswald rode in at the gate and turned off to the stables.

"I really believe that is Oswald," cried Cecil, jumping up in her surprise. She was so seated that she could not see who entered the grounds, but she knew the tramp of her brother's great black horse Phosphorus, and felt sure he had arrived.

"Yes, it is he," said Esther.

"He is home early this evening : I wish I had not put off the dinner-hour."

In two minutes Oswald entered by the window, Hector and Scamp following him as far as they dared. Hector, knowing that he approached forbidden ground, turned back with dignity as soon as his master reached the verandah ; but little Scamp ran up the three steps and put her nose into the room, as if to ascertain whether she might venture, and, seeing Cecil busy at her work, at once decided to retire. It was one of Cecil's specialities to be very kind to animals, but "to keep them in their proper places." Esther often wondered how she resisted the well-bred advances of that grand old fellow Hector, or the winning little ways of pretty tricky Scamp. If Cecil had any pets they were her ponies, and they, of course, never dreamed of trespassing beyond due bounds, though sometimes they played truant when turned into the meadow, in order to come at sweeter, fresher pasture ; for horses are knowing creatures in this particular, and are as well aware when their *carte-de-jour* pleases them *as any diner on the Boulevard Italien !*

"*Why, Oswald, what brings you back so early ?*" was *Cecil's accost.*

"My industry for one thing, and my pleasure for another."

"I am so glad to think you are industrious !"

"I have been industrious—I have got through a world of work this morning. That is how I came away so soon. I really believe everything is arranged, and my uncle will have no trouble when he arrives. So I made it my pleasure to hasten home and spend the evening with you and Miss Kendall."

Now, Miss Kendall, though she liked Oswald very well, and was trying to like him better for Florence's sake, had come so to enjoy her quiet afternoons with Cecil that I am afraid she scarcely appreciated the favour conferred upon her. Cecil was going to read to her after tea, while she got on with the grounding of a piece of work that Miss Uffadyne, who generally despised canvas and German wools, had been deluded into commencing for a charitable fancy-fair. Esther, to whom the work was a novelty, liked it, and had set herself a task for the evening, while Cecil was going to read to her from Spenser's "Faerie Queene." Now she might work as nimbly as she chose, but the story of "Britomart" would not be forthcoming.

"I am sorry I ordered a late dinner," began Cecil, making her excuses ; "but I quite thought, from what Thomas said, you would not be back till almost eight o'clock !"

"Never mind ; give me some of your tea, and we will adjourn the dinner till supper-time. In fact, I dined with Reeves at Guiseley. I went in to see him about the twenty-acre lot that Marsden wants to have, and he was just sitting down to stewed steak, and most respectfully requested me to join him and make it my luncheon ; and I lunched so heartily that I can afford to dispense with dinner yet awhile. Pour me out a cup of tea, Cecil. No, not any bread-and-butter, thank you. Shall I read to you, ladies, this evening ?"

"Ah, if you will. How charming. I had promised to read to Esther the legend of 'Britomartis,' but I can finish that sketch I made the other day while you read to us both."

"I will read to you both with pleasure, but not

‘Britomart,’ if you please. I always get tired of Spenser : it is bad taste, I suppose.”

“Very bad taste.”

“Now, Cis, did you ever know any mortal creature read straight through, of his or her own free will, the six mortal books of the ‘Faerie Queene’?”

“I have read them, every word, Oswald ; and I intend, that is I wish, Esther to do the same.”

“Poor Miss Kendall ! . And she will do it religiously, no doubt, out of deference to your superior judgment.”

“I shall do it,” interposed Esther modestly, “because I like it. I think it is a very charming poem.”

“So it is, no doubt, but long drawn, spun out, like a sermon that lasts fifty minutes while it could have been well delivered in five-and-twenty. Wait till you are going through the last cantos, you are only at ‘Britomart’ yet ; and the legend of the Red Crosse Knight, and the story of Una, and the chronicles of Sir Guyon are exquisite I grant, but the stanzas in my opinion gradually decline in power and in beauty from the close of the second book. When you are wading through the sea of misadventures of Belgê, and the exploits of Calidore, I think you will grow a little weary of the story.”

“Well, you may read us what you choose, Oswald. Esther and I can go on with Spenser to-morrow. Drink your tea now, before it gets cold.”

After tea Oswald walked to the bookcase and took down Tennyson.

“Now, then,” he said, “we will have the genuine article.”

“You surely do not mean to infer that Spenser is not the real thing?”

“Of course not ; I only accuse Spenser of prolixity ; and then he is an old-world poet, and just now I am not inclined to turn back upon the age of chivalry. I want something stirring, inspiriting ! ‘I, the heir of all the ages, in the foremost files of time——’”

“Please not to give us Locksley Hall, an’ you love me, Oswald. It is a fine thing, I know, and full of truths ; but *it is intensely* bitter, and I am tired of it also : when I hear

it I cannot get the jingle of Bon Gaultier's rhymes out of my head. Give us anything else ; I think Tennyson will be quite new to Esther."

"Let us have the Lotos-Eaters."

"That is inspiriting indeed ! It inculcates sloth to such an extent that it is positively immoral. The Society for the Suppression of Vice ought to come down upon it ; for what vice is more injurious to individual and to social interests than laziness ? It is the very root and source of vice, the parent of all other vices."

"You are difficult to please, Cecil. Perhaps you would prefer 'How doth the little busy bee' ?"

"No, I would not ; though, of course, I duly appreciate good Dr. Watts. The poetry of the Lotos-Eaters is fine, but then it inculcates, really inculcates, idleness !"

"What a curious poem it must be," said Esther, looking up from her work.

"I think I must let you hear it after all, Miss Kendall ; that is, if you are not afraid of your morals being corrupted."

"It will not hurt Esther ; no fear of her being won over to declare that 'slumber is more sweet than toil.' She would as soon as I wish to live in a land where it is always afternoon. But read it, Oswald."

Oswald read beautifully ; his reading was like his music, deep-toned and sweet, with an evident predisposition to lapse into the minor key. He read the Lotos-Eaters till Cecil paused in her drawing and Esther let her work fall from her fingers.

"There, it is taking effect already !" he said, gaily, as he closed the book.

" 'There is no joy but calm !

Why should we only toil, the roof and crown of things ? ' "

"I am glad I have heard it," said Esther, resuming her needle ; "every line is beautiful, and I could fancy that one might read it again and again, and find it ever beautiful, just like some strains of music of which we never tire. But it is *not the sort of poetry to do one much good !*"

"Decidedly not," put in Cecil ; "I knew you would say so, Esther. Oswald used to be very fond of it, he was always quoting it ; he was the idlest fellow in existence when he came home from Oxford. If it had not been for Florence, I do not know what he would have come to. It is only of late that he has begun to exert himself, and taken life as something to be worked out with toil and pains. 'Let us alone ; what is it that will last ?' was ever upon his lips."

"After all, Cis, I am not sure but what it was the truest philosophy. It sounds magniloquent, certainly, all that rhapsody about the battle field of life, and 'Forward ! forward let us range !' But, after all, what does it come to ? 'There is no joy but calm !' It is true, Cecil."

"Give me rather a little tempest while I am in this sub-lunary sphere ; something to strive for, something to contend with, something bracing, like fresh frosty air on a sunshiny winter's day, or like the salt breeze upon the shore when the tide is coming in. Anything but a profound calm ; I should die of it."

"What a very rumbustical young woman you must be, Cis ! But are you not mistaking the meaning of the word ? Calmness is DIVINE—true calmness, which means repose and pure peace ; and I well believe it can only be attained by the stern performance of duty, and through the refining processes of sorrow. He who would have 'calm' must first have faith—a settled, quiet, conscious faith in God. Stagnation is not calmness ; it is no more to be compared with it than the stillness of a land-locked pool whose waters are corrupt by reason of their inaction, is to be named in the same breath as the comparative stillness of the sea when the tempest is over and no rude breath of wind sweeps over it. There is grandeur in a stormy, dashing sea, and we know its wild raging exercises a wholesome influence upon the land ; but we love a placid ocean with the calm moonlight sleeping on the waves."

"Still there is a joy *not* born of calm !"

"Undoubtedly ; but the crown of all joy must be when it *grows calm and still*, and it is only the highest and best kinds of joy that can be so settled and intensified as to find their

climax in true calm. Mere passion, mere impulse, mere love of change, dies out or else stagnates as soon as the excitement of the hour is over. Well, Cis, have I proved that you are wrong? Life is a comedy of errors."

"Say rather a tragedy of errors. It is wicked to call life a comedy, though now and then it may doubtless have its comic aspects. Trust me, Oswald, there is more of tragedy than of comedy in this world of ours, though now it is the fashion, I know, to turn everything into fun. Levity is one of the sins of the age."

"Perhaps so; but I am sure God never meant life to be a tragedy. He never created beings that they might be wretched here or in the world to come. No, I will not grant that life is a tragedy."

"Neither is it a comedy."

"What then shall we call it?"

For a minute there was silence; then Esther lifted up her head, and said, modestly—

"Might we not call it a poem that should be written grandly, and sweetly, and in the fairest characters?—a poem that should exercise a good influence over all who read it, whether it be now in its unfinished state, or presently when it is completed? Then it would not be all sadness nor yet unbroken gravity; it would have its bright sparkles and its airy, flashing stanzas; but the great body of the poem would be serious, sacred even, having a purpose, and so perfect in every part that, if the book were suddenly closed, and the tale left half untold, it would still be grand and good, and so sweet that men would mourn because the end of it was never written."

"The end of such life-poems is written in heaven, Miss Kendall," said Oswald, gravely. "Thank God! there are many such."

That night, when Esther was gone up to bed, Oswald said—

"That is a very extraordinary girl, Cecil."

"I found that out some time ago."

"But she is *changed* since she came; her face has altered: *it has refined, and grown softer and sweeter.* She is a rare

creature, that girl ; and to think of her being a slaving, household drudge, as Florry describes her to have been ! ”

“She did the drudgery bravely and patiently, and God released her from it.”

“How glad she and Florry will be to meet. It is to Florry’s honour that she so soon discovered a diamond in the rough ; but then, trust her always for finding the good and beautiful, and separating it from the coarse and evil. There are not many like Florence Guise.”

Cecil went and closed the piano, making no reply. Somehow she did not like to hear her cousin Florence lauded so very much, even though the praises came from her affianced husband. Neither did she relish the idea that Florence came first with Esther.

CHAPTER XXII.

CECIL MAKES A PROPOSITION.

A FEW quiet days followed—days of rest, and of pleasant readings, and of peaceful, happy talks in the gloaming of the sweet May evenings ; for April with her fickle smile had passed away, and May, with her vivid sunshine and her wealth of fairest flowers, was gladdening all the land. It was with something like rapture that Esther gazed around her, when first Cecil took her for a drive through the leafy lanes, where pale primroses were nestling among their crinkled leaves in the bright, green, fresh-springing grass, where the hedges were already white with snowy hawthorn, and where one could catch glimpses of the fields beyond, where banks were blue with the wild hyacinth, where the lambs fed and gambolled, and where little glittering streams went wandering hither and thither, their course chiefly revealed by the emerald-like verdure of the sward upon their brink. And then, leaving the shaded lanes, with their feathery larches, and the green-tasselled sycamores, and the *newly-leaved limes*, they passed on to the open heath, and *wound along the turfy roads* till they saw the sea, all blue

and sparkling in the cloudless morning sunshine. And last May Esther had watched from her attic window the slow budding of the spring trees, and the tardy unfolding of a few puny, blighty-looking flowers in the dreary Queen Square garden, and when people said "It would soon be summer now," she had wondered why any one should care about the change of season. What could it matter whether days were long or short, whether she walked in July heat or in January frosts, whether the leaves were on the trees or scattered all sere and yellow on the swampy lawns or mossy walks, or around the damp stone figure of Queen Anne herself! "What did anything matter!" had been the hopeless question she most frequently asked herself in those grey, dim days of the weary, miserable past. Only to get out to church on Sundays, and listen to the singing, and feel soothed with the prayers, and to seize a few minutes for reading such books as came in her way, were all the pleasures she ever anticipated; and even these were very few and far between, since she was not always allowed to attend Divine service in the church of St. George the Martyr, not even once on each successive Sunday, for the children were apt to have Dominical attacks of sickness and naughtiness, and the lodgers would order sumptuous Dominical dinners, which Biddy was utterly inadequate to prepare; and Myra Hellicar, if she had a decent dress or bonnet, or what she esteemed such, was always in a religious frame of mind on Sundays, and attended the morning if not the evening service, clad in all the finery she could scrape together, while on her return she severely rebuked her husband and her step-son Dick for their shocking heathenism. If her dress was at all shabby, or her bonnet very much behind the fashion according to her notions, she had an excruciating headache, and stayed in bed till dinner-time, and was extremely snappish for the remainder of the day.

And now all was changed; and Esther, with renewed health and invigorated spirit, felt as if her life ought to be one perpetual doxology, and with increased fervour she *joined in the thanksgiving prayer*, which says:—"And we

beseech Thee give us that due sense of all Thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, and that we show forth Thy praise not only with our lips but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to Thy service, and walking before Thee in holiness and righteousness all our days." Just then it seemed to Esther as if that petition included all others, as if that one clause of duty involved the whole Christian life, and she hoped she was

"Ready to give thanks and live
On the least that God may give."

It was nearly a week after that reading of the "Lotos-Eaters," and Esther was feeling quite well again ; she could walk round the garden several times without pain, and with very little fatigue : the next day was Saturday, and in the evening she was to go home to the Slade Farm, and on Monday morning she was to be once more at her post among her scholars. She was sitting on a garden-seat, admiring the lovely prospect, and inhaling the fragrance of the lilacs, and wondering how Mrs. King's pet plants had progressed during her absence, when she heard herself called, and in another moment she saw Cecil walking quickly towards her. "Esther !" she cried ; "Esther ! Oh ! there you are, hidden behind the rockery. Do you think you could take a long drive ?"

"Yes ! I am sure I could ; a drive would be delightful such a day as this. I long to be somewhere out on the hills, or on the heath. How bright and blue the sea-line looks this morning ! I should like to be a little nearer to it."

"Your wish may speedily be gratified ; shall you be afraid if Oswald take the reins ?"

"Not at all. I am not nervous now, and an accident is not likely to recur. I will go and get ready as soon as you like. Where are we going ?"

"To Guise Court ; you will like that. Oswald has had a letter from Florence by this morning's post, and they are coming home to-morrow, and we both think we ought to go *over, and see that everything is in readiness. You shall make up the bouquets for Flossy's rooms, if you like?*"

“*Like*, indeed ! Nothing could give me greater pleasure ; it is so good of you to let me do it.”

“Then put your hat on as quickly as possible. Oswald is gone round to have the ponies harnessed. I knew you would choose to go with us. We must be off in about twenty minutes.”

What a glorious and entirely delectable drive that was ! How sweet was the air ; how pleasantly the young leaves rustled in the soft spring breeze ; how delicate were the vivid hues of green over all the smiling landscape, and how exultingly the lark poured out his lay far up in the intense blue heavens ! And when that blithe carol was done the cuckoo began his song, and in the hedgerows there were tender twitterings, and in the woodlands skirting the lonely road, low, sweet gushes and trills of melody ; and a hum of insects was in the warm air ; and one or two white butterflies were disporting themselves among the wild flowers which grew on both sides of a mossy fern-grown wall ; and all nature seemed bright and rejoicing in the quick advent of the blessed summer-time.

Esther did not talk much ; on such occasions it was her wont to be very quiet ; she did not care to converse, she wanted to listen to the voice of music and song that was sounding all about her ; and her heart drank in the beauty of the glorious arch of sky, just flecked with little fleecy clouds, and of the lovely hues of emerald, and olive, and ruddy brown that gleamed upon the trees, and of the hills, shining purple in the distance, with here and there bare rifts of rock, looking like dark, mysterious hollows, unfavoured by the happy sunshine that was lighting up all the brilliant expanse of country the whole horizon round.

When they came to Guiseley Hill they all got out and walked up the steep ascent, and presently the grey archway leading into the park showed itself, and Esther wondered how it felt to be born to all this affluence of splendour and wealth ; and she looked at Oswald, the heir of these fair broadlands, to see if any new pleasure dawned in his eyes as they gazed dreamily on the hoary battlements and the ivied *turrets of the low square tower* which served as a lodge.

But his thoughts were evidently far away, and he was thinking very little about Guise Court at all, very little about the Guise family ; and even Cecil thought him strangely abstracted, and wished he would wake up from his reverie, and pay some attention to the subject on which she was endeavouring, under difficulties, to converse. Cecil had a supreme contempt for "*dreaming*," and as for airy castle-building, she professed to hold it in abhorrence ; nevertheless she built castles enough upon the most aerial foundations, only the architecture of them differed from the majority of those "*Chateaux en Espagne*" which people of ordinary ambitions love to raise in cloudy regions. I really believe there is not a person in the world, however practical and sober-minded he or she may be, who does not occasionally call into existence these fairy fabrics ; only one man builds a baronial residence, and another a mere cottage ; one man a gaudy palace, and another a benevolent institution ; one a temple of science, another a lonely hermitage. And Cecil's visionary erections took the form of model schools, homes for working people, and many a thriving work of philanthropic zeal in which she and Esther were to engage through the coming years, successful in their every undertaking, untiring in their efforts, triumphant always in the crusade against sin and ignorance and misery, to which they had pledged themselves. For in all her future work Cecil now associated Esther, being resolved, as she privately informed Oswald, "to make a woman of her." Oswald shrugged his shoulders as suggestively as if he had been a born and bred Parisian, and marvelled at his sister's infatuation. If he had any discrimination Esther Kendall would never grow into the sort of woman Cecil Uffadyne had planned ; she would never devote herself to a "mission," nor be, as Cecil herself was, honorary secretary to half a dozen societies, home and foreign ; she would work, and energetically too, but her views would not be Cecil's views, neither would her standard of happiness be the same. These were Oswald's unexpressed thoughts when his sister hinted at a future in which she and Esther were to conquer, if not the *world*, wide provinces of that wretched land which the Prince of Darkness and his emissaries hold as specially their own.

"What are you dreaming of?" asked Miss Uffadyne at length, rather crossly. "I have been talking to you about the Social Science Congress for the last quarter of an hour, and I do not believe you have any idea what I have been saying."

"I am ashamed to say I have not. I beg your pardon, Cecil. I was thinking."

"I know that. What about, pray?"

"As you are not my confessor, I may be excused from answering that question. My thoughts are my own."

"Undoubtedly," replied Cecil, with just a little pique in her air; "and I really do not care to know, for I am sure they were very foolish, aimless thoughts. No one ever thinks of anything useful or wise with that dreamy, far-away look in his eyes."

"Now, really I protest, Cecil! Is it not too bad, Miss Kendall?"

"I think it is. One cannot be always intent on things practical and definite."

"You do not mean that, Esther?" interposed Cecil, reproachfully. "I know no one less dreamy than yourself."

"But are not all actions dreams, as it were, before they are performed? Must not one dream before one can *do*? And I do dream a great deal; I always did. I dreamed when I was a little child, when I was a sullen, desolate girl in Queen Square, and I dream now; and I do not think it is all in vain that I have these dreams, which are very sweet and pleasant, and which seem to beckon me on to higher and better things."

"I did not know you were so romantic," said Cecil, gravely. "But when you are a few years older you will find that your dreams only deceive you, and you will learn that only in the sober, stern realities of life can one hope to find a lasting, pure content."

"'Methinks the lady doth profess too much!'" laughed Oswald. "Oh, Esther, that sister of mine is the most inconsistent creature in all Christendom—I don't know about the Zenana women, or the Red Indian squaws! She repudiates *sweet dreams*, and cultivates poetry. She preaches the most

rigid, uncompromising virtue, and yet though she scolds the erring and the lapsed, she holds out to them hands of sympathy and kindly aid. She has done little else than rebuke me, whenever I have been in her society, for these ten years past; she has all but convinced me that I am the most worthless, the weakest, silliest, wickedest fellow in existence! Yet she loves me, and pets me after her fashion, and treats me as if I were not only a reasonable but an exemplary individual. Cecil Uffadyne is a mass of contradictions, as you will find out before very long, Miss Kendall, if you have not already made the discovery. Don't look vexed, Cissy."

Cecil was looking not only vexed, but pained; there were actual tears in her dark eyes, though she would not let them fall. Esther felt grieved, as she always was at these little tilts between the brother and the sister; she earnestly wished that Cecil were not so constantly finding fault with Oswald. Having an undoubted affection for each other, they yet contrived to be in perpetual antagonism about little things; they were constantly carrying on a sort of guerilla warfare; Cecil seeming always on the watch for defalcations, and ready to pounce upon the young man and prove him to be utterly mistaken whenever he gave his opinion. She was very much like an over-anxious and earnest, but unwise mother, who foolishly, and of course vainly, tries to mould to her own idea of perfection the child whose temperament is entirely dissimilar from her own, and whom she does not and can never understand.

Cecil did not understand her brother, and, with all her love for him, she worried and irritated him perpetually. Men will not bear for long incessant fault-finding and continuous moralising, even from the women whom they truly love; and Cecil would have been very wretched had she known how much she had weakened the warm fraternal affection that had once been almost enthusiastic. She knew that he was changed, that he did not, as in old time, pour out his whole heart, confiding to her his beliefs, his doubts, his struggles, *and his failures*. But she attributed this to his engagement. *Florence, of course, held the place that had once been hers;*

it was Florence whom he now trusted and consulted, and it was Florence whom both in word and action he strove to please. And though Cecil often rated herself finely she could not help feeling silently aggrieved; she knew it was a petty and contemptible jealousy that she entertained; she told herself again and again that all was as it should be. Florence was to be Oswald's wife, and therefore even now, though unwedded, she ought to be first and chief with him, and all the confidence reposed in her, all the devotion she received, was only her just due, and no reasonable—nay, more, no *right-minded* person, could possibly find fault with such a state of things, or wish them otherwise. Still, Cecil felt that she was, in her heart of hearts, jealous of Florence Guise. She quite believed that she never evinced any unworthy feeling towards the fair girl who was to be her sister; but she was conscious of a certain harshness in her judgment where Florence was concerned. She liked Florence to be mistaken; she did not care to be much in her society; above all things she tried to convince herself that the engagement, though excellent in a worldly point of view, was very bad for her brother, and would hinder him in running the race which she had marked out for him when he was a boy in jackets, with perennially dirty hands, and torn pocket handkerchiefs, and requiring constant sympathy in the matter of puppy-dogs and cricket-bats.

“Oh! I wish Oswald were wiser, nobler, stronger,” sighed Cecil, as her brother turned away to the stables, whistling his favourite air from *Il Trovatore*. “He either makes everything a jest, or else he affects a lightness of sentiment that is almost as distressing as if it were quite real; indeed, one cannot help fearing that it is real.”

Esther said nothing, but earnestly she wished that Cecil were a little less hard, a little less exacting, and Oswald a little firmer, a little graver, a little more energetic, both in tone and action.

“Why do you not speak?” said Cecil, irritably; “nothing provokes me so much as that taciturn expression of yours! You must know I want you to speak, Esther. Even if you *disagree with me, speak*—say something, at all events.”

"Suppose, dear Miss Uffadyne, I do not say what you like?"

"Still say it. . Do you think I am unreasonable? Is it I who am to blame? Is not Oswald's tone of frivolity apparent to you? Does he not take life as if it were a country dance, a mere burlesque, a child's play, and nothing more?"

"If you ask me, I do not think he does. Miss Guise would never care for him if he had no strength and depth in him. But please do not ask me such questions; it does not become me, the village schoolmistress, to discuss Mr. Uffadyne."

"Esther! you doubly vex me. You know I regard you as something more than the village schoolmistress. Are you not my friend?"

"I hope so; I feel your kindness more than I can express, and I trust God will give me grace to be to you a true and faithful friend—your grateful, humble friend. I do not aspire to be your equal; I do not wish to presume upon your goodness, or upon that of Miss Guise. I know who I am, and what I am, and I am content."

"Have you no ambition?"

"Plenty! I want to know things; I want to learn so much; I want—oh! I cannot tell you what I want, Miss Uffadyne, for my desires are almost illimitable; I want to be brave, and true, and steadfast, and very useful, and always loving; but I do not want to be a half-and-half lady. I am Esther Kendall, who six months ago was a maid-of-all-work in a London lodging-house. By the providence of God, through the kindness of friends, I am able to earn my own livelihood. If I may do so from henceforth, and worthily, I shall be very happy."

"But, Esther, you must be aware that you are vastly superior to the general run of schoolmistresses either in town or country!"

"I may have more refined tastes, though how I came by them is more than I can tell, and I am not at all sure they are a blessing; they were a torment to me in my Queen Square life."

"God gave them to you for some good purpose; but we

will not attack that question now. I only want to convince you that you are more my equal than you imagine. I was born to ease and in some measure to affluence, and I can choose my own work, if it be my pleasure to work at all ; while you, poor child, were born to toil and penury, and your work, unsuitable as it was, was put into your hands without any reference to your own will or wishes. You were neglected and unjustly treated, while I was tenderly nurtured and well taught. There is not actually so much difference between us ; if our positions had been reversed I am not sure that I should have borne on so bravely and hopefully as you did. I do not know ; I have never been tried with adversity ; and yet—and yet, Esther, it has not been all sunshine with me. I am always looking for golden days that never come ; there is a sort of greyness about my life in spite of all the advantages of my lot. I daresay you think I am talking in a sadly discontented strain, but I am not quite myself this morning. I will tell you, Esther, what I have never told any one yet—the great necessity of my life is *love*, not the trash that boys and girls call love, nor yet the mingled sentiment and passion of men and women, ending always in orange blossoms and a wedding-ring. I want such love as you may give me, such as Oswald gave me once ; I ask nothing better. I have loved women who seemed to love me ; but other, and to them more satisfactory loves came in their way, and I was forgotten. Once I thought I had Oswald's best affections, and I was more than content ; I asked no higher happiness than to be permitted to devote myself to my only brother. Then this phantom of 'love,' as people call it, as if it were *the* love of the universe, came in his way, and he followed it, and clasped it in his arms ; and now Florence Guise is his darling, and I am *only* his sister. She is first and best, and I am—anywhere !”

“ But Florence will be his wife, and surely God meant men to love their wives above all other creatures, more even than their own kindred ? ”

“ Perhaps He did. I cannot gainsay it. Let it be then ; I may *as well* relinquish gracefully what I can hold no longer. *There is nothing* more unsatisfactory, more hopeless, more

pitiable, than trying to hold fast the affections that are slipping away from you. Better resign one's self at once to the pain than torture one's self with fruitless endeavours to win back vanished love. I see more than ever that the old sweet ties that united Oswald and myself are broken, or so loosened that all their pleasantness is gone. I resign myself to the loss, but I need some kind of substitution. If you like, Esther, you may be all I require ; I think you love me."

"I do love you, Miss Uffadyne ; I should be a very heartless girl if I did not. But—pray do not be vexed—your sphere and mine seem so different that I cannot think how I can be to you all you need. I will love you and serve you always, if that is what you want."

"I want that and much more. I want you to work with me, to plan with me, if need be to suffer with me. As soon as Oswald is married I have a scheme in my head which you and I must carry out together ; you must live with me. Do you consent ?"

"I must think ; I could not promise all at once."

"Certainly not ! Though I cannot see why you should hesitate long. You would be to me as my sister, and we should be two happy, useful, honoured old maids. Cannot you promise ?"

"Indeed, no ! Please do not think me ungrateful ; but it would be a sort of vow, you see, and it would not be right to pledge myself all in a hurry. Besides, I am afraid I could not give up my independence."

"Then you do not love me. But do not imagine you would live a life of idleness with me ; you would be as busy as you are at present, far busier perhaps. However, we must go into the house now, and we will talk the subject over some other time. Perhaps when the idea is not so new it may startle you less. In the meantime, do not speak of it to any one else."

"Of course I will not."

CHAPTER XXIII.

ESTHER'S PROMISE.

Cecil and Esther went in by a side entrance, intending to go straight to Mrs. Maxwell's room, which was in that quarter of the house ; but they saw the good old lady at the end of the long passage which led into the great hall, engaged in conversation with a trim, jaunty young woman who had about her an unmistakeably London air.

"I suppose Florence has been sending on a servant or two," said Cecil ; "for that young woman is decidedly not one of our Somersetshire lasses, and I never saw her at Guise Court before."

The young person in question had rather a languishing air ; she wore her silky black hair *à la Eugénie* ; her cuffs and collar somehow reminded Esther of Mrs. Hellicar, and her apron was a miracle of art. Just as Cecil and Esther came within earshot they heard her say, "And my lady desires you will be as quick as possible, Mrs. Maxwell ; any of the men or boys about the place can take the note, she says ; and I am coming down to luncheon as soon as I have finished Miss Guise's unpacking, and I should like something delicate and appetising, for I am not strong, and I never take much breakfast ; and really I feel that sinking and weak——"

Mrs. Maxwell cut short the young person's observations by remarking that she could not stand there all day talking about people's appetites ! "The bread and cheese, and cold meat, and seed-cake, and good home-brewed ale, were always set out at the proper time for the upper servants in the housekeeper's sitting-room, and people who wanted their luncheon must come when the bell rang, and take what was on the table, or else go without !"

At that moment Mrs. Maxwell perceived Miss Uffadyne, and curtsied low. The young woman gathered up her skirts *with a gesiure of scorn*, and tripped mincingly upstairs.

"Who have you here, Mrs. Maxwell?" asked Cecil

immediately. "That young woman has rather a town-bred air, I think! And what did she say about Miss Guise?"

Mrs. Maxwell answered Miss Uffadyne's questions as they were put: "That young person, ma'am, calls herself Mamselle Virginie, though why I don't know, since she owns to being born in Lambeth! But this I do know, that she is a very stuck-up, conceited, badly-mannered little minx, and the sooner our young lady gets rid of her, and takes to a sensible, well-taught Somersetshire girl the better! And you will say the same, Miss Uffadyne, when you have seen what Mamselle is. And Miss Guise, ma'am, and of course the master, came home last night, and took us quite by surprise, as I may say, though everything was in readiness, even to the towels in the chambers, for I am not one, Miss Uffadyne, to leave things to the last minute; if I had been, the master and the mistress might have had a fine house to come back to, as I told Jenny and Deborah this very morning. *They* wanted to finish the rooms to-day, but I insisted upon all being ready last night, and well I did, as they own now themselves; and I hope it will be a lesson to them. But, dear me, here I am chattering, and you will be wanting to go to Miss Guise."

"Where is my cousin?"

"She is in the morning-room, Miss Uffadyne, and the master is there too. Oh, miss, you will be shocked to see him; he is not long for this world, I am sure."

"I feared my uncle was worse, but I hoped that he was not really failing so fast as Miss Guise imagined. Does he seem very much weaker, Mrs. Maxwell?"

"He is so weak, ma'am, that it was a hard matter for him to take the journey. It's my opinion that he felt he must get home at once, or *never*. Oh, ma'am, he has got that look in his face that belongs more to heaven than to earth. It is as if he could see the glory he is going to, and wanting to be there, and yet quite patient, and willing to wait God's *time*."

A door opened, and there, fair and sweet as ever, but *rather paler*, rather graver than when she and Esther parted,

stood Florence Guise. But she welcomed them with her own bright smile, saying, "This is good of you, Cissy ; and so good to bring Esther. Come and see papa."

"We came to-day to be sure that all was quite ready for you ; of course, we knew Mrs. Maxwell was to be depended upon in great things, but we meant to undertake the little things. I was going to dust my uncle's books, and place them in the order he likes best, and Esther was to arrange flowers in your room and everywhere ! I have found out that she has a special genius for making up all sorts of bouquets."

"So kind of you both ! And to-morrow was really the day fixed ; but all was arranged, and papa was so tired of London. Indeed, we were both yearning for Guise, and he asked if it would hurry me too much if we set off at once, and I said no, and we settled our bills, and came away to Paddington. We telegraphed to Mrs. Maxwell, but as there was no station here the message got delayed, and only reached her half an hour after we had actually arrived. Oh, Cecil, what a long time it is since I saw you ! I am so glad to be at home again, dear ; only—only papa is so much weaker." And the tears came into Florence's gentle eyes, and streamed down her cheeks. But it was only for a moment ; she was soon calm again. "It does not do to give way," she said, quietly ; "it grieves papa if he sees that I have been crying. And indeed both the London physicians said that he must on no account be excited or distressed. Anything like anxiety, anything that saddens him, you know, tends to bring on those cruel attacks of pain ; a very little thing does it, and then he suffers such dreadful agony, and nothing gives relief. And now the attacks last for hours, and leave him so exhausted that any one not used to his illness would be quite sure he was just dying. And some day he will sink past rallying. Dr. Milne said it would be so ; but in the meantime I have to be careful to avoid whatever may bring on an access of the malady. So I have learnt control, Cecil, and I can generally manage to seem *pretty cheerful* ; it is hard work to smile and talk *calmly when your heart is breaking*, but then it is for papa's

sake. It would be so selfish to give way, and I shall have time enough for weeping presently ; for it must come—oh, Esther, it must come before very long, and when I think how much he suffers, and how great is the joy for which he is waiting, I cannot ask God to prolong his life on earth. My loss will be so much his gain that I can bear to lose ; it will not be for always.”

Mr. Guise was indeed fearfully changed since Esther had bade him good-bye in Queen Square four months before. He had the look of one who has suffered to the utmost, and who is waiting only for the Lord’s summons to rest from pain and weariness for evermore. Though on the pale, worn face were the traces of frequent and excessive anguish, there was no look of sadness, no sign of murmuring discontent. It was indeed as if, gazing beyond the short vista of agony and death, his soul saw the golden gates, and beheld the Face that was once more marred than any man’s, and caught the smile of welcome that awaited his arrival in that bright land, where the inhabitant shall no more say, “I am sick,” where there shall be neither sorrow, nor crying, nor any more pain, because the former things have passed away.

Esther touched with awe the thin hand held out to her, and looked almost piteously upon the beautiful attenuated features that seemed instinct with Heaven’s own brightness. She thought she had never seen anything so touchingly, so unsurpassingly fair, as this faded, sharpened face, with its lines of pain, and its aspect of swift decay, and its radiant yet peaceful gladness. As she looked and forced back the tears that longed to flow, she thought of that verse : “As for me, I will behold Thy face in righteousness ; I shall be satisfied when I awake with Thy likeness.” And so close had been the walk of that Christian man with his God, so pure and steadfast his faith, so perfect the resignation of the will, that now, with “the fulness of joy” close at hand, he was as nearly “satisfied” as he could be, while yet the spirit lingered in her mortal tabernacle. A very little longer, and he *would see the Master “face to face,”* and praise Him perfectly *whose love had brought him in safety from the unconscious hours of infancy to the very brink of Jordan ; brought him*

through all the perils and temptations of youth and early manhood ; brought him out of darkness into light, out of the slavery of sin and death into the service of the eternal King of kings ; brought him through days of sorrow and bereavement, through hosts of foes that assailed his heavenward path, through all joy and through all tribulation, till now, the same Divine and ineffable love walked with him through the dark valley of death, and would be with him as he crossed the stream that lay between him and the land of pure delight.

“ Well, my dear, I am glad to see you at Guise,” said the invalid, when several hours after he and Esther were alone in the room, Cecil having carried off Florence for a private talk, and Oswald being in the village. “ And you are happy, too ; I need scarcely ask you ? ”

“ I am very happy, Mr. Guise. God has been so good to me, He is so good to me, and I hope and believe I trust Him for all time to come. I think I want nothing only to serve Him better.”

“ That is much, indeed, to crave for no more than God has given you. May it be always so with you, my child ; may you be always content with what He ordains, not wishing it otherwise, not fretting for that which is withholden. Just resting in His love, seeking that all His will may be accomplished in you, and knowing and being fully persuaded that out of the most seemingly untoward and painful circumstances will be wrought out the richest blessings and the greatest joy. *To trust*, Esther, that is what is wanted—to trust entirely ; taking God at His word, seeking for strength to discharge the simple duty of the passing hour, and leaving all the rest to Him. There will come a day when all that is so perplexing will be made clear, when there will be no more mysteries, when we shall know even as we are known. It is not much that God asks of us, only to wait and *see His salvation*.”

“ But next to God, I must thank you, Mr. Guise ; but for you and Miss Guise I might still have been the miserable girl I was when first you saw me. And now—oh, when I think of it, it seems too much. If I were only worthy of my friends ! ”

“ *God, your Father, sent you those friends, as much as He*

sends food for the young ravens when they cry for hunger. He saw your need ; He pitied you. He knew that you could not help yourself, and he sent us to your aid."

"I feel that ; still I may be grateful to the second cause. I owe so much to Miss Guise and to yourself."

"It is to Florence you owe the most, for it was she who was first interested in your behalf, and earnest to do you good. From the very first she cared for you, and longed to help you."

"I know it, and she did me good from the very earliest hour of our meeting. I *felt* her goodness, and I longed to follow in her steps, if only it were a long way off. Oh, if people would think more of their unconscious influence ! Lives are more than sermons ; the teaching of a holy, loving life is far beyond that which we may get from books. I had come to hate religion, to scoff at it, I am afraid, because those who professed it so loudly were the least like what I was sure Christ Himself must have been. It seemed to me that our Lord must have been kind, and patient, and hopeful—not stern, or gloomy, or finding fault ; and yet with my belief in Him—for I always knew He was the Saviour, the King of all the earth—through my contempt for those who called themselves by His name, and yet honoured Him with their lips only, I was in danger of becoming something like an infidel. And then Florence came to be my good angel, to show me that there was truth upon earth, and to show me the beauty of real Christianity."

"Esther, I believe you feel grateful to my Flossy. If ever it were in your power to be a help and a comfort to her I might rely upon you to be to the utmost of your power that comfort and that help ?"

"Oh, yes, I think so. Indeed, I believe I may say I am sure of it. I have often grieved to remember how very little hope there was of my being able to recompense her even in the smallest degree for all her kindness."

"My dear, in this world there are many changes. Flossy is very young ; she may have a long life before her, and *who shall say what may betide ?* Princes born in the *purple have died* paupers ; those who have been most loved, *most cherished*, whose friends have been most numerous and

most powerful, have been glad of one humble, faithful heart whereon to repose when nature was sinking into decay. We cannot tell how it may be. My Flossy is in the spring-time of her days, and I am going home. I should like to think that *you* would be her true and faithful friend."

"God helping me I will be to Florence Guise all that you desire. I will be while life lasts her true and faithful friend, even though for her I must leave all other friends and renounce all happiness but that of serving and loving her. I promise it."

"God bless you, my dear ; I know you will keep your promise at all costs. I wonder, though, if I am doing right in asking so much. Is it selfish ?"

"Not at all. But, Mr. Guise, there is Mr. Uffadyne. Florence will be married, and then she will need no other friend than her husband. He, at least, must be her closest, dearest friend on earth."

"It should be so, and I hope my daughter will be happy in her marriage. I respect Oswald Uffadyne ; I have a strong affection for him—my dear sister's only boy. But I sometimes think—I wonder if Flossy would have been his choice had he been left quite free to choose for himself. Perhaps I have made a mistake : I cannot tell—I must leave it all. Oh, Esther, it is so much easier to have faith for yourself than for those you love best, for those you leave behind you when God calls you to Himself. God bless my darling and be to her a Father and a Friend when I am passed away."

"He will, He will," said Esther, fervently. "Do not fear ; Florence will be blessed : I am sure she will. God will be with her, and guide her, and comfort her to her life's end."

CHAPTER XXIV.

DICK ASTONISHES HIS FAMILY.

MEANWHILE a great gloom descended upon the house of *Hellicar*. The Guises had departed, and with them the

most reliable as well as the largest source of the Hellicar's income, for the head of the family had not done well in the commission line lately, while Dick had done only too well, for he had been within an ace of procuring for himself board and lodging free of expense in that grim-looking mansion undelightfully though perhaps commodiously situated at the corner of Newgate Street and the Old Bailey. Not only was there an end of Mr. Guise's free-handed hebdomadal payments, the sum-total of which rather astonished him occasionally, while Florence had something more than a suspicion that articles were frequently entered in the weekly account of which they had never enjoyed the benefit, and which most certainly they had never ordered ; but toll, or commission in kind, as Dick gravely called certain peculations, could no longer be levied on butcher's meat, poultry, fruit, baker's bread, butter, vegetables, confectionery, wine and spirits, and every kind of comestible, which was the lawful property of the Guises, and served in many ways unlawfully to enrich the larder of the Hellicars. Mrs. Warburton also had departed, declaring that she had not tasted food fit for human consumption since Esther had ceased to reign over the pots and pans and roasting-jack, and no one applied for the vacant rooms, and only Mr. Macgregor remained to devour mutton-chops which he brought into the house himself, and to scold about his burnt porridge, the meal for which he duly measured out with his own hands from a securely-padlocked box kept in a corner of his room. There was nothing to be got out of the thrifty Scotchman beyond the small sum which he paid for his single apartment, and his temper was unpleasantly acrimonious ; nevertheless, as he gave little trouble and paid his bill regularly, the Hellicars were fain to keep him as their lodger ; and now there arrived a certain Saturday evening when his payment was all that could be counted upon for the defraying of all household expenses, and Myra sat in the untenanted front parlour making her miserable wail, regretting that she had ever been born, and deploring the folly *which had led her to link her fate with that of a man who hadn't a bit of sense to do any good for himself, while she*

might have married to her carriage and pair, and a footman, and her own maid, if only she had not been so easily persuaded, and so led away by fine words and specious appearances.

And thus Myra bemoaned herself, and truly not without cause. Everything was going wrong—"rushing to the dogs," as Dick had said that very morning. No money coming in from "the business in the City," and the father and son had dissolved partnership. No new lodgers came to fill the empty rooms; Biddy managed worse than ever, and the servant who had been engaged when Esther left had departed in great anger, and subsequently summoned her master for her wages.

In spite of the large sums paid by Mr. Guise, and in spite of all the perquisites levied on their property, the Hellicars were no better off than when we first made their acquaintance—except, indeed, that Mrs. Hellicar had provided herself and Lizzie with various articles of apparel, investing largely in mock ermine, cotton velvet, imitation lace, and paper silk dresses. The younger children were all cross and ailing, and no one seemed to have the knack of managing them as Esther had; and there was incessant crying, and scolding, and quarrelling, and whipping, in the Queen Square household. Tommy had taken to have fits, and little Fanny had had measles, and seemed as if she never meant to get well again. The baby evidently did not intend to trouble himself to get upon his feet; he was still in arms, a lumpy, dumpy, flabby, white-faced infant, with staring black eyes, and a head that rolled about as if it had never been securely set upon his shoulders. Also, his successor was expected to arrive some time in the course of the summer. "Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them" was a text that always exasperated Mr. Hellicar; it seemed a mockery, and nothing more or less. Quiverfulls were all very well when people prospered, and could afford to maintain a proper nursery establishment, to buy embroidered robes, and jaunty little knickerbocker suits by-and-by, and pay school-bills, and defray the expenses of *perambulators*, and doctors' bills, and sea-side migrations;

but for his part he did not mind how empty his quiver was, and he would have been piously resigned had it pleased God to take to Himself any of his miserable olive-branches, save and except Lizzie, for whom he really had something like paternal affection.

Sick, and full of nervous fancies, poor Myra sat that wretched Saturday evening, listening to the wind rustling the leaves in the poplars and the planes that beautified the Square, and wondering what was to become of her, and thinking, as she had thought a dozen times before, that she would very likely die, and so escape any further mundane troubles and anxieties. Only she knew she was not prepared for another and a better life, and what if by going out of this miserable world she should make a still more miserable exchange? Poor Myra! she knew quite well that her grandiose professions, and her flaunting attendances upon the services of St. George the Martyr, were verily as sounding brass and tinkling cymbals; and so she hoped to live on, though prolonged life might bring only unmitigated wretchedness.

She was trying to get the baby to sleep, feeling some maternal compassion for the wailing little creature, with its preternaturally large bobbing head, and its shrunken features, and its wide-awake black eyes, and still wondering, with a very helpless wonder, poor thing! what she would do presently with two babes on her hands, and no Esther! "*No Esther!*" that was the burden of her melancholy song; for she knew now what Esther had been, and how little she had cost to keep, and how things had gone from bad to worse ever since Esther had been driven away—yes, "*driven away.*" Mrs. Hellicar called it that when she communed with her own sad heart, though she always spoke of "Esther's base ingratitude" when she talked about her exodus to the friends with whom she habitually exchanged confidence. While she was musing thus she heard the latch-key in the door, and then there were heavy footsteps in the hall that resounded through the empty house and startled the restless child, *effectually banishing the sleep that was just beginning to steal over its unearthly eyes.* Dick and Mr. Hellicar came in.

"Hush!" said Mrs. Hellicar, querulously. "Don't you see you've woke up the child, and he was just going off? and I am tired to death, and only fit to be in bed."

"Confound the child!" said Dick, savagely. "Why don't you have babies like other people's? That child's head has been loose ever since it was born. Can't it be screwed on tighter! If ever I have a child it won't have its head wagging about in that fool's fashion, I promise you; or, if it has, I'll give it an overdose of *Daffy*, or anything to put it out of its misery."

Myra began to cry; she had grown much afraid of her step-son lately; she was half afraid that he really would kill her, or some of her children, one of these days; for he was always talking about "clearing the house of some of the live lumber that was in it."

"I won't have that, Dick," said Mr. Hellicar, feebly; he did not like to stand by while his wife was bullied, but he too was half afraid of Dick, and preferred not to interfere. I will not record Dick's explosive answer nor the conversation that followed. I am not writing a sensation novel; I can therefore afford very well to dispense with what might perhaps be rather exciting, but at the same time far from improving in any point of view. It is enough to say that Dick spoke as no son should ever speak to the worst of fathers, and that he was by no means choice in the language he employed to convey his thoughts, which were of such a nature that I do not think Myra was greatly in error when she pronounced him "brutal!"

The quarrel ended, however, as quarrels often did end in the Hellicar household—they made it up over a relishing supper and liberal potations of hot gin-and-water; but how the spirits, and the lamb-chops, and the early spinach were procured, I really do not know. I can only say that there was no ready money in the family purse to pay for any of these delicacies. When amiability was restored, and Myra had a little recovered her spirits, Dick observed that he had something particular to say, and he might as well say it at once and have it over.

"*The fact is,*" he continued, "I am tired of the life I

lead. I'm tired of coming home to so much confusion and noise, and to fighting children, and to crying babies with waggling heads and goggle eyes. I mean to leave you all to settle it among you, and I shall set up for myself."

Mr. Hellicar groaned, but secretly he felt relieved. Dick was very clever certainly, and he had a fine spirit of his own, and a courage that prompted him to deeds of "derring-do." If he had only lived in the days of highwaymen his fortune had been made—that is to say, he would have become a hero of the old romance school, and have shared the laurels of Turpin and his compeers, and finished up with a rope and the gallows-tree at last. Dick Hellicar was quite as unprincipled as his father, but he did not share his many weaknesses. Hellicar *père* sometimes had scruples ; Hellicar *fils* had none. Also Hellicar *fils* was possessed of far more energy, perseverance, foresight, caution, and judgment than had ever distinguished Hellicar *père*. Indeed, Dick was a very talented young man, and he might in the fulness of time have ranked with the merchant princes of the land if only he had been endowed with anything like a conscience. If only to judgment he had added integrity, to caution honour, and to industry plain dealing—if only he had discarded trickery, knavery, absolute dishonesty, and the finer branches of cheating, and cultivated instead those virtues which make a man respected in his day and generation, there is no knowing what Dick Hellicar might not have been.

But as things were Mr. Hellicar was always afraid of coming to grief through his son. He often missed golden opportunities himself from sheer want of courage, while Dick dashed at them and secured his prey ; only there is always a Nemesis stalking somewhere in the shadows, and she is sure to come up in course of time, and paralyse with her awful gaze the rash adventurer who, all in vain, strives to unloose himself from her piercing, unrelenting clutches. And at this moment London, or that portion of it which knew the Hellicars, was all too hot for Master Dick, and his father lived in perpetual fear of being fatally compromised, and made *the victim* of one or another of his clever son's misdeeds.

"Set up for yourself?" faintly inquired Myra.

"Yes. London is not just the place for me now. I'm thinking of going into the provinces. I've heard of a capital situation in Liverpool, and I know of a very first rate opening in Birmingham. There are many nice, snug little trades in Birmingham—trades that want a cool head, and a sure hand, and a daring spirit, and a world of ingenuity, and I flatter myself I possess all these requisites. But I am not sure yet whether I won't go to Liverpool. I should hate an inland town : I've been used to shipping all my life."

Lizzie, looking out of her black-beady eyes, thought that which she dared not say, that both Liverpool and Birmingham might very well dispense with the patronage of her half-brother ; that neither would be likely to compete with the other for the honour and advantage of numbering him among its citizens.

"*And,*" continued Dick, with solemn emphasis, "*I mean to get married !*"

"You are better as you are. Take my advice, and don't do anything of the sort. Why you are only a boy ! And, Dick, the women do hamper one so !" returned Mr. Hellicar.

"I'm sure I pity the woman that Dick makes his wife !" said Myra, significantly.

"And so do I," piped Miss Lizzie, in her shrillest voice.

"She's much obliged to you both," retorted Dick ; "but, if I were you, I'd keep my pity till it was asked for. Next to good advice, there isn't a more unappreciated commodity in the market than pity that isn't wanted. Well, you don't ask who the girl is."

"You don't mean to say you've made up your mind so far as that?" said Mr. Hellicar.

"I know," sneered Lizzie. "It's that nasty, bold, light-haired girl, Selina Simmons ! I know Dick took her to Rosherville the other day."

"No, miss, it's not Selina Simmons. It's somebody you know a great deal better than that silly baggage, who hasn't as much sense as you have ; and I don't think much of your understanding, I can tell you."

"You don't mean ———?" cried Mr. Hellicar, as a sudden *light flashed upon him.*

"Yes, I do," interrupted Dick; "and I'm going down to Chilcombe to-morrow to ask Esther Kendall to marry me out of hand."

"It won't do, my lad," returned Mr. Hellicar; "it won't do."

"I say it shall and it must do! I love Esther Kendall; she's a girl of a thousand, and I've meant to marry her ever since she was ten years old. I saw what was in her. She would make a man happy and comfortable, and not sit dirty and untidy over the fire dreaming away in idleness or reading foolish novels and pretending to be a lady."

"She'll never have you," was Mrs. Hellicar's comment.

"I hope she will," was Lizzie's *sotto voce*. "I hate her, and she'll soon wish she were dead if she marry Dick."

"It won't do, my lad; I tell you it won't do."

And Mr. Hellicar shook his head lugubriously, finished his tumbler of gin and water, and went off moodily to bed.

CHAPTER XXV.

CIPHERING MORNING.

ON the Saturday evening, as had been arranged, Esther went home to the Slade Farm, where I need not say she was heartily welcomed by the farmer and Mrs. King. She had been away scarcely a month, and yet it seemed to her as if a very long time had elapsed since last she stood in the large, comfortable kitchen, that was looking its very brightest and cosiest when she entered it about nine o'clock. Out of doors it was by no means dark, but the kitchen did not face the west, and the heavy mullioned windows, which were of no great size, were overshadowed by sprays of clematis, and *noisette* roses, and Virginian creeper; so indoors there was not much light, save that which came from the fire, glowing ruddily on the hearth, and reflecting itself in the pewter plates, and in the shiny dish-covers, on the clock-face, and on *all the polished furniture that came within the radius of the blaze—even on the dark oak beams that crossed and recrossed the low and curiously-panelled ceiling.*

Mrs. King was laying the cloth for supper, and something was sputtering on a gridiron in the back kitchen, while a very appetising odour pervaded all the lower regions of the house. The farmer sat in his great arm-chair, with the weekly newspaper resting on his knees ; he had been reading as long as he could see, and now he laid down the *County Chronicle*, and began to talk to his wife, as with her usual quickness and precision she set the table for the evening meal. A few minutes before Esther made her appearance the farmer had said, "Missus, thee doesn't think our Esther will be spoilt?"

"Nay, William ; why should she be spoilt?"

"You see, she has been up at the Chenies so long, and all as one of themselves, and their ways and our ways are pretty different, I take it."

"Esther Kendall won't be the sensible girl I've taken her for if she frets over fine ways and grand furniture. I daresay she'll miss some things at first, it's a deal easier to take to luxuries than to turn your back on them ; but I shall be very much disappointed in Esther if to-morrow she isn't as cheerful as ever, going about the garden and the farm wanting to know how the fields and the animals have been getting on while she has been away. And on Monday morning she'll go to school as gay as a lark, I'll answer for it. Bless you, William, she felt very lonely at first, I can tell you ; and though Miss Cecil was very kind to her, and the servants waited upon her all right and proper, I know she was pining for home, and longing to get here to be nursed by me and Patience. She out and told me so the first time I saw her alone at the Chenies. Says she, 'I shall never get well here, Mrs. King ; I feel like a fish out of water here in Miss Uffadyne's dressing-room. I wish I might come home.' And she meant it too."

"Well, I hope she'll not be discontented, but it will be a great change for her after the Chenies, with the fine linen, and the cut-glass, and the silver plate, and everything else conformable."

"I'm sure everything is as nice here as it need be. Where would you see a whiter cloth than that on any gentleman's

table? And it's clean, too, though it's Saturday night. I know some people who would put up with anything because it is the end of the week; but that's not my way, and never has been; my mother brought me up to be more particular than most folks in my station. And look at these knives—no grit on the handles, no blades all dim and smeared. And the forks, though they are only steel, are the very best of their kind, and not a bit of dirt in between the prongs. And what silver there is is as bright as if it had just come out of the Queen's plate-basket. These are the spoons we bought when we were married, William, and they are just as good as ever. I don't let my silver get scratched and dented like some I've seen. And I've roasted a chicken, and there's a nice little boiling of asparagus, and Patience is just broiling a few rashers of that bacon that you say is the primest I ever cured, and that's a supper fit for anybody as is reasonable. And here she is! That's Miss Cecil's pony-carriage. It has stopped at the gate. I must go and meet her."

And down between her bright flower-borders ran good Mrs. King, and before Esther could take three steps along the gravel walk she was clasped in the motherly arms and kissed as tenderly as if she were the daughter of the house coming home after a long absence. How sweet and calm it all looked in the shadowy gloaming! How quiet was the peaceful homestead! How fragrant was the still evening air with the breath of the lilacs and the hawthorn and other lovely blossoms of the flowery May! And in the porch stood the farmer, his eyes glistening with satisfaction, for Esther had crept into his heart unawares; she had reminded him so often of one of his own little lasses long since laid in the churchyard, that he began to look upon her as having come in the dead child's stead, to fill the place so long and sadly vacant in his fatherly affections. And he bestowed upon her a very fatherly kiss, first saying, with a little humour in his tone, "I may; mayn't I, missus?"

And the missus replied, "Thee may kiss who thee likes, William, for I know thee wilt never kiss any as willingly as *thee kisses me*. But thee'st more than welcome to kiss *Esther*; it makes her seem more like our own girl. Now

get in, child, and take off thy bonnet, and come down and have a bit of supper with us once more."

And presently Esther found herself in her own bed-room, with her own little properties about her, and the sweet air coming in laden with perfume through the open oriel window. Everything was so neat and clean ; such an aspect of purity and freshness was on the plainly-furnished room ; the bed furniture was, as Mrs. King boasted, "white as the driven snow," and the fringed covers on the table and on the chest of drawers were quite as spotless ; a gay pincushion brightened up the toilet, and a few flowers were tastefully arranged in a vase upon the mantel-piece. It was a new experience to Esther ; she had never in all her life known what it was to have the sense of "coming home," for the very simple reason that she had never before had any home to leave or to return to. Still the being once more at the Slade did not afford the unmingled satisfaction she had looked for during the first week of her captivity at the Chenies. After the little bustle of her arrival had subsided, she did feel the difference between the ways of the farm and the ways of the household she had left. She missed many little things that had grown in the short space of one month to be as necessities of life ; involuntarily she put out her hand for a table-napkin, and her nerves were somewhat jarred when the farmer, according to custom, conveyed his knife to his mouth and afterwards helped himself to salt without the intervention of a salt-spoon. Esther had witnessed these and worse usages among the Hellicars, though she had never been tempted to conform to them herself, and they had greatly annoyed her. But now she felt painfully the lack of refinement which was so visible in kind, fatherly farmer King, and she wondered why his wife, who was far more amenable to the rules of good breeding, had never tried to make him more polite. She did not know as yet that every man, however good and gentle, has at least one tender point on which he will brook no interference from his woman-kind. Farmer King liked to indulge in certain habits ignored in polite society, and those habits he held with *dogged pertinacity*, constantly affirming that his house was

Liberty Hall ; and once upon a time he had caused to be inscribed with many a flourish, on an embossed and gilded card, which he placed above the huge mantel-shelf, "Hospitality, no formality, ever you'll find here !" And to this profession he rigidly adhered ; his hospitality was unbounded, but it would have been none the less acceptable had he mingled with its exercise some trifling amount of ceremony. Not that the good man was essentially *vulgar*, for true vulgarity, like true politeness, springs rather from the heart and mind than from want of knowing better or from force of lifelong habits and associations. Still Esther felt the change, though she chid herself for every little discontent and involuntary shrinking, and she resolved to watch herself very closely lest by any inadvertent speech or look she should hurt the feelings of these kind and worthy people. After all, when she came to think about it, farmer King's sins against good breeding were peccadilloes when compared with some of the usages of the family in Queen Square, and anything was better than Myra's affected gentility on particular occasions. Better far the homeliest grogram, whatever that time-honoured material may be, or the coarsest linsey-woolsey, that is what it seems to be, than the far showier and seemingly more costly fabric that is not what it professes to be.

On the Monday morning Esther went to her school, and was warmly welcomed by the majority of her scholars, and very soon she was as thoroughly absorbed in her work as she had been before her long and unexpected holiday commenced. Some of the children had gone back in their lessons, some had seemingly forgotten all they had ever learned, and some few of them had fallen into lazy and rebellious habits. The young schoolmistress found that she had quite enough to do, without indulging in vain regrets about mere trifles ; though some of the girls were really thankful to get back to their studies, there were not a few who chafed at the now unaccustomed restraint, and longed to get out of the weary school-room into the flowery meadows, or even to be hanging *about at home*, doing a turn of housework now and then ; *anything rather than the monotony of learning lessons, and*

writing copies, and making shirt-sleeves, and keeping silence when they longed to chatter.

Esther was very weary that Monday evening ; she had had several small encounters with obstinate children, and though she had succeeded in gaining the mastery, the victory had cost her something. She felt harassed and depressed ; even her best pupils had lost ground ; all but Mary Murrell and Anne Culverwell had to refresh their memories extensively, and she felt as if her labour had been in vain, and as if the proper state of things would never be restored. She could not help grumbling a little as she sat at her tea with Mrs. King ; she had not lost her interest in her work, far from it, but the zest and relish with which she had discharged her pleasant duties were certainly diminished ; a sort of languor was creeping over her energies, and she found herself continually reverting to her sojourn at the Chenies, wondering when Cecil would ask her there again, and rejoicing in the prospect of the Midsummer holidays, not so very far away. Mrs. King said nothing, though she remarked Esther's worn, dejected look ; and she noticed that every time the house-dog barked, or the latch of the garden-gate clinked, she looked anxiously down the gravel walk as if expecting an arrival. Nevertheless she hoped that two or three days would make all the difference ; Esther would be reconciled to her humble home, she would fall back into her old ways, and be happy and diligent again, and go to her work morning and afternoon with renewed delight and animation.

But the next day and the next slipped by, and there was no improvement, and Mrs. King began to feel very sorrowful. The bright, earnest Esther was gone, and in her stead was a dreamy, sombre Esther, who seemed incessantly brooding over difficulties or disappointments. And difficulties she had, which she did not as usual bring to Mrs. King ; the children were really very trying, they were continually idle and contumacious, and nearly every hour of the school-day was marked by some dispute or contest, that required her utmost stretch of patience, and all her stock of firmness. And then—*she was quite conscious of it herself*—her temper *was not as even as it used to be* ; she allowed herself to be

irritated, and, what was worse, showed her irritation, and children are so quick to discern the failings of those in authority. These Chilcombe children were neither better nor worse than others of their generation ; even their station in life had little to do with it. They looked for absolute perfection in their governess, and were at first surprised, then pleased, and lastly stimulated to conflict, when they found that she really could be *cross*, and hasty, and what they chose to call "horridly disagreeable."

Cecil was at Guise Court, and so Esther could not tell her of these troubles, and something seemed always to hinder her from confiding as of old in Mrs. King. She grew more and more unhappy ; even her own studies, to which she had at first eagerly returned, became wearisome and dull ; listlessly she opened her French books, and listlessly she looked out words for her translation, her thoughts wandering far away. Carelessly even she worked the sums, which it was necessary she should go through before she had to examine them in the school-room ; and she contented herself with "keys," whereas she had till now scorned the idea of copying down figures which she had not duly tested. Esther loved arithmetic, and she quickly comprehended every rule, and hitherto she had chosen painfully to work out every proposition, however complex, rather than take anything for granted. She had availed herself of the "key" hitherto, only to assure herself that her own solutions were perfectly correct ; now it was far otherwise.

It was about ten days after the school had reopened that a very untoward circumstance occurred. Matters had in no wise mended, and the antagonism between teacher and pupils had obviously increased. The girls were glad when the hours of school were over ; the governess was scarcely glad, but very much relieved, and evening by evening she went home to the Slade weary, discontented, taciturn, and sad. The grey cloud seemed settling down upon her life once more ; the golden sunshine was withdrawn. And yet the world was as fair as it had been on her birthday ; friends *were as kind*, her occupations were the same, her recreations *still the same*. The change was in herself, and she knew

that it was so, and felt the more miserable and the more hopeless that she could not exactly charge any one or anything with the dull, vague misery that oppressed her.

It was "ciphering morning," and the children were more than ordinarily trying, and Esther had pretty nearly exhausted all her stock of patience. She had taken great pains with many of the girls, trying to simplify all that seemed obscure, showing them over and over again how certain processes must be followed out, and how the requisite result might be attained. She had never refused help to any one, unless convinced that she had to deal with incorrigible laziness or sullen obstinacy, and generally speaking "sum morning" was as bright as any in the week. This morning, however, was anything but bright; idleness, carelessness, and stupidity prevailed among the scholars, while Esther felt not the smallest inclination to concession. Sum after sum was crossed over without a word of explanation; tears were as plentiful as figures, and everybody's slate was smeared and greasy. The tears that were shed so profusely differed widely in their nature; some of them were mere foolish, childish tears, showering like April rain one minute, and wiped away the next. Some were tears of disappointment and regret, some of anger, and some of utter weariness. Even steady, persevering Mary Murrell went back to her seat with a long "Rule of Three" sum ruthlessly condemned. Esther had merely crossed it off, saying, "Altogether wrong," without telling her where the error commenced, or how it could be rectified. Mary's head ached, and one or two large drops fell unseen on the neatly-figured slate as she prepared to rub the whole sum out, and begin again at the beginning. She cared for Esther's unkindness far more than for the trouble she must take.

There was a girl in the school named Belinda Smith, a niece of Miss Amelia Matilda Smith, of the Chenies, the Smiths apparently, as a family, dealing in fine names. Belinda was just thirteen, but, as Cecil herself frequently remarked, older than her years. She was clever and cunning, untruthful, and given to fits of sullen obstinacy. *She had always been a trouble, and several governesses who*

had preceded Esther found her quite unmanageable. Cecil had threatened more than once that she should be expelled, for her example was terribly pernicious, and in combats with her teacher she was not unfrequently the victor. She had never triumphed since Esther had been mistress, for Esther had been warned and advised by Mrs. King, and she had carefully refrained from anything that might actually provoke hostilities. When she made ridiculous mistakes, evidently intended to test both her teacher's knowledge and her temper, Esther treated the blunder simply as a blunder, giving her credit for not knowing any better, thus implying that Miss Belinda was very dull indeed.

The girl was vain and ambitious, and it did not suit her to be considered stupid ; so, finding that she could not bring her teacher to an actual passage-at-arms, she sulkily obeyed her, and at last changed her tactics, and so brilliantly that Esther was seriously afraid at one time of not being able to keep up with her eccentric pupil.

Belinda was well up in arithmetic, and her sums were generally now worked with exceeding accuracy. Her answers were commonly correct, even to a fraction. This morning she brought up her slate as usual, pushing it rather rudely before Esther, who at once desired her to stand back.

Belinda retreated half an inch, and gloomily waited her turn, annoying Esther all the while by beating a sort of tattoo on the frame of her slate. Her turn came last of all, and she stood by sullen and vindictive while her sum was being examined. Esther only looked at the answer, and found it differed in several particulars from the one given in the key. She coolly drew the sponge across, and pronounced the monosyllable, "*Wrong.*" Belinda was quite as much astonished as exasperated, and, out of sheer surprise and curiosity, she went back quietly to her seat. She understood the rule so well, and she had done the sum so carefully, that an error seemed impossible. However, she would work it through again, she was determined, and then, *if still the answer were condemned*, she resolved that no power on earth should make her try again. She strongly

suspected that she was right, and that her governess was in error.

With almost dogged perseverance she performed her task, testing her calculations slowly one by one, and going over the whole sum twice before she carried it up for re-examination. The result was precisely the same as before; the same figures showed themselves at the bottom of the slate. With a sullen air Belinda again presented herself at Esther's desk; this time no one else was there, and her slate was taken in hand immediately. And again Esther drew her pencil across the sum total, and, without vouchsafing a word of inquiry or explanation, turned away to another girl who came up with her slate.

Belinda walked back to her desk, and sat perfectly still, not even handling her pencil. Esther perceived the state she was in, but she did not interfere till the clock struck twelve, and the girls began to put away their books and slates before going home. Then she called her—

“Belinda Smith, bring up your sum.”

Belinda brought it, standing by with a fierce scowl upon her brow that at another time would have unnerved Esther, and made her hesitate ere she pledged herself to any course of action. Now it only roused her to anger; she knew that Belinda *could* work the sum easily enough, and she saw that she had fallen into what the girls called “one of her fits,” and that she would not make a figure unless compelled. And to compel her Esther was resolved; obstinacy should be met with firmness. Belinda should find that she had met her match, and her proud, rebellious spirit should be conquered.

“Wrong again,” said Miss Kendall, at a glance.

The icy coldness of her tone lashed her pupil into a rage. She looked defiantly in Esther's face, and replied—

“It is not wrong.”

“But I tell you it is, Belinda; the answer is glaringly incorrect, there is an error somewhere.”

“No, there isn't.”

“Belinda! do you know what you are saying?”

“Yes, I do. And I say it again; that sum is right, every

figure. I know ciphering about as well as you do, and I am sure there is no mistake."

"Go through it aloud."

"*I won't !*"

"You will not?"

"No, I will not! I shall not touch the sum again, or my name is not Belinda Smith. Do it yourself!"

Vainly Esther tried to be calm and dignified; she was so very angry herself, perhaps naturally so, that she did not know how best to deal with this incorrigible child. She could only, in a trembling voice, reiterate her commands, declaring that Belinda should not leave the school-room till the sum was worked correctly. It was clearly a struggle for authority, and the other girls wondered among themselves how it would end.

"Linda Smith always has got the best of it," said Sarah Lee to Mary Murrell.

"She has never got the best of it with Miss Kendall," replied Mary, "and I don't think she will now. Of course she ought to do her sum over and over again till she finds out the mistake. Mine was dreadfully wrong this morning, and it was only just one figure that threw all the rest out. I had forgotten to carry something—that was all; but it made all the difference."

"Well, I don't know but what Linda will get the upper hand to-day. Miss Kendall isn't herself; she's as cross as two sticks."

"She isn't herself."

"No, indeed; she's in nearly as bad a temper as Linda, and she won't give up an inch, and Linda won't. I should like to stop here for the dinner-hour and see how they get on."

Presently Esther wrote a short note, and gave it to a little girl who passed the Slade on her way home, and charged her to deliver it to Mrs. King. The result of the note presently appeared. One of the farm boys came to the school-house with a basket containing Miss Kendall's dinner, since Miss Kendall could not leave her post.

Esther had not much appetite for her dinner, nor did she much enjoy it; but Belinda was very hungry, and the odour

of the stewed beef made her nearly frantic. If Esther had offered her any she would certainly have been compelled to take it, for she was feeling absolutely ravenous. The truth was, Miss Smith had not breakfasted that morning; she had come down late, and had been scolded by her mother and taunted by her brothers, and she had torn out of the house in a fury, without, as Mrs. Smith said, "having had a bit or sup between her lips that day." Doubtless this abstinence would not tend to soothe her spirits or to increase her amiability. By dinner-time she was furiously hungry, of course, and soon she began to feel very sick and faint.

Meanwhile, Esther gave the residue of her dinner to a beggar, and occupied herself with a book till the girls returned for the afternoon lessons. Strange to say, it never occurred to her that the trusted "key" could be in error; and, after what she had said, she felt no inclination to go through the sum herself, at least, while Belinda Smith was present.

Afternoon school commenced, and Esther was soon very busy with the girls' needlework; but ever and anon she looked anxiously at the place where Belinda sat in solitary disgrace leaning her elbows on the desk and her face buried in her hands. She had not touched the slate since she carried it away the second time, and Esther's heart misgave her that she had done a foolish thing in thus publicly striving for the mastery. She knew that if she yielded now it would be all over with her authority, and that not only as regarded Belinda. To draw back now would never do; it would be injurious as well as pusillanimous; to succumb would be to place herself at disadvantage for ever afterwards among her scholars. And yet, what if she suffered defeat? Would not that be worse even than a drawn game?

As the afternoon waned she became more and more uneasy. She could see that Belinda had not wavered, and how was it to end? She could not keep her a prisoner in the room till her obstinacy was starved out of her, and she could not force the stubborn fingers to resume the pencil; still less could she force the stubborn mind to make once more the necessary *calculations*.

Lessons were over, and the girls went home once more ; but still Esther and Belinda sat wearily in the school-room, the one making an attempt at writing, the other gazing sullenly out of the window.

Esther made herself some tea, and after a little consideration she took a cup to Belinda, and said—

“Take some tea, you naughty girl, you must want something, I am sure. It is your own fault that you are here ; you are punishing yourself. Drink your tea and eat a piece of cake, and behave like a reasonable creature. Go through the sum once more, and then if it is not right I will help you.”

Had Esther taken that tone hours before, the encounter might never have taken place ; but the girl's worst passions had been aroused, and she was not now to be cajoled with a few quiet words, a cup of tea, and a piece of seed-cake. She would have liked the tea very much, for she was thirsty and feverish, but the strong craving for food had subsided. She had kept her fast now for two-and-twenty hours. She was a growing girl, and not particularly strong ; and it is not to be wondered at that she was getting too sick, and faint, and dizzy, to prolong the contest actively. Her resistance had become passive, but it was not the less actual resistance, it was insurmountable as ever.

She sullenly pushed away the cup she longed to taste, but did not speak.

“Belinda,” said Esther, gravely, “I did not think you could be so silly. Come now, try the sum once more.”

“I have *said* I will *not* !” was the reply.

Though the girl's voice trembled from weakness, there was that in its tone which seemed to say, “No ; I shall not give way ; do not think it. I will die of hunger rather than attempt the task.” Her face was very white, her lips colourless, and dark circles were round her heavy eyes ; she looked extremely ill, and the young governess began to wonder what the mother would say when her daughter at last presented herself at home. Mrs. Smith was a terrible vixen, unless her neighbours belied her ; she was by no means a tender parent, for she worried her children continually with scoldings and reprimands, and occasionally, when very much

provoked, she beat them unmercifully. They were the worst children in the country, she frequently averred ; but then if she chose to say so, no one else must make complaints. The Smiths were an unpopular family in the village, and the juvenile members were constantly coming to grief ; but woe to the man or woman who presumed to inflict summary vengeance or to punish the offenders. All the storming and all the beating Mrs. Smith preferred to do herself ; and the most foolish of fond mothers could not have felt herself more aggrieved than did Belinda's maternal parent when any kind of discipline, however needful it might be, was exercised for the benefit of her unruly offspring.

Belinda had expected her all the afternoon, for of course she would be missed at dinner time ; she did not know that her mother had gone in the tax cart to the cathedral town to sell her overplus of butter. She was beginning to feel deserted, and her illness increased every moment ; she longed to lie down anywhere, even on the floor ; yet still she kept her seat, leaning heavily, however, on her elbows. She could not have done the sum now if she had been willing ; the pencil would have dropped from her fingers, and the figures would have faded before her eyes. She wondered, half fearfully, what ailed her. She had been poorly often enough ; once or twice in her life she had been very ill, but she had never felt anything like this before. Though the evening was unusually warm she was cold and inclined to shiver ; her hands and feet tingled strangely, the room seemed turning round and round, her head swam and then became a dull, heavy weight. Esther's voice sounded as if it came from a distance ; it was like listening to a sermon, in a half-awake condition, on a drowsy Sunday afternoon. Could she be going to sleep ? or was she dying ? Could this chill, and numbness, and breathlessness be really *death* ?

She was too far gone to speak or think ; she gasped for breath, she swayed backwards and forwards on her seat and tried to call for air, for she thought she was going to be suffocated. Esther caught her in her arms, or she would have fallen heavily upon the floor. And Esther, who had had *some experience* in fainting fits, though dreadfully alarmed,

did not lose her senses ; she laid the unconscious girl on the floor with a cushion under her head ; then she fetched water and dashed it in her face ; she loosened her dress and rubbed her palms vigorously. She was just reviving, and Esther was trying to administer a spoonful of tea, when Mrs. Smith walked in and gave a sort of fierce howl, beholding the prostrate condition of her daughter.

“What have you done to her?” demanded the virago, menacingly.

Esther explained as well as she could.

“They tell me,” pursued the angry woman, “that my lass there has not been home since morning, that she hasn’t tasted food this day, that you’ve kep’ her here clemming and starving, and it looks as if it was true.”

Esther replied that it was Belinda’s own fault ; and she went over the story as hurriedly as possible.

Mrs. Smith could hardly wait till it was finished ; ere Esther’s voice had ceased she burst out with—

“And a pretty schoolmistress you must be, that couldn’t make the girl do her sums ! There’s some people as have no power about them ; they never can get obedience, but they’re not fit to be set over others. They’d better not be school-missuses !”

“I have always been obeyed before,” said Esther, sadly ; “this is the first time a pupil has defied me.”

“And then,” continued Mrs. Smith, her temper getting quite the better of her prudence, “in order to spite the girl because she’s given you trouble, you keep her starving till she’s a’most clemmed ; she isn’t a strong lass, and I shouldn’t wonder if this isn’t the death of her !”

Belinda, who was now quite conscious, set up a prolonged wail at hearing of her probably untimely fate, and her furious mother raved on, now upbraiding her daughter, now abusing Esther, and giving her, as she elegantly expressed herself in after narrations, “the length of her tongue.”

And a very long tongue it was, and a sharp, stinging, cruel tongue ! Esther began to think it was worse even than *being under the lash* of Mrs. Hellicar’s unruly member. The *noise Mrs. Smith* made quite stunned her, the accusations she

brought against her were confounding, and she could neither defend herself nor bid the incensed woman leave the room. Belinda sat upright now, looking ill and scared, but evidently enjoying the fracas. Of course there was no more question as to the sum being worked, or left as it was; Belinda must go home, and though she had fought hard for it, Esther felt that she had lost the day. Belinda had not gained a glorious victory, but she had defeated and put to shame her adversary, and she was prepared to depart as triumphantly as her physical weakness would permit.

"Why didn't you do your sum, you obstinate little fool?" asked her mother, shaking her up a little as a preparation for walking home. "Couldn't you do it?"

"I did do it; I did it twice," said the girl, as full of defiance as at the outset of the quarrel; "and I said I wouldn't do it again—and I *won't*, not for nobody!"

"If she says she won't, she won't, leastways not for you," cried Mrs. Smith. "*I* could make her do it; for I'd beat her on her bare neck and shoulders with a good sharp switch till she did do it, if I'd ever said she should! I beat her as long as I could stand over her not a fortnight since because she wouldn't go and weed the strawberry-patch when I bid her to! And she wouldn't do it then, so I took a little rest, and then gave it to her again, more sharply than at first; and I told her I'd beat her every hour till she did as she was bid, if it was for a month to come, and if I wore out fifty switches across her stubborn shoulders. So at last, after three good dressings, and weals on her as big as your little fingers, she went and did as she was told. That's the way I conquer her."

"If you found so much difficulty, Mrs. Smith, can you wonder at my failure?" asked Esther, quietly. "I could not beat her, of course; I would not."

"You'd better not, Miss Governess; if you had touched my girl I'd just have boxed your ears soundly. Now, Linda, get up, and come home. I don't know as you won't get a taste of the switch to-night before you go to bed."

"Oh, please do not," said Esther, imploringly, her heart full of pity for the unhappy child. "She has been punished enough to-day."

“ You think so, do you ? That’s my look out ; I do what I like with my own. Come along, Linda. I shall go and see Miss Uffadyne to-morrow and let her know what sort of schoolmistress she has set up. Why, you’re only a child yourself, and haven’t a bit of judgment. I daresay as it was you as was wrong, and not the sum. My lass is generally pretty right in her figures ; she helps keep her father’s accounts very prettily, and it’s very rare that she’s mistaken. You had better do the sum yourself, Miss Kendall.”

And at last Mrs. Smith walked away, hauling her daughter with her ; and after watching her out of sight, Esther locked the door and sat down and wept most bitterly. How she wished she had never provoked the wretched contest ! What a day it had been ! Ah, if only she had contented herself with telling Belinda that she must be very stupid, as her sum was wrong the second time ! if only she had not grown hard and stubborn herself, and resolved upon subjugating the perverse, rebellious child ! She felt now that she too had been fighting her own way to get the victory, rather than firmly acting upon principle. Of course, having publicly declared that the sum should be done, she felt obliged to enforce her commands, but as a wise teacher she should have refrained from clashing with such a temper as Belinda’s was well known to be ; in such a case open war never should have been declared, she had acted most unwisely, and she had let her temper get the better of her judgment. Cecil would say she had been imprudent ; Florence would say she had shown an unchristian spirit ; altogether Esther felt her defeat painfully, knowing that it might involve rather serious consequences. There was no knowing what would grow out of to-day’s failure, and this one unhappy contest might lead unavoidably to many more.

But worse was yet to come. When Esther had had her cry out she took up the slate on which were yet Belinda’s figures, and began to work the sum, in order to see for herself where the error lay. Row after row was carefully tested and found correct ; she came to the bottom at last, and found *that her sum total and Belinda’s were the same.* With *beating heart* she determined to go over it once again ;

she took a fresh slate and put Belinda's out of sight, and once more she made with redoubled care and precision all the calculations, and with just the same result. She could not doubt now; Belinda had been right all the time, and the "Key," which she had trusted, was in error. Oh, how vexed, how humiliated she felt, sitting there in the lonely school-room, with those long arrays of figures, and that unlucky "Key" before her. How Belinda would triumph now, and what would Mrs. Smith say? And yet Esther felt inclined to rush off there and then to the little farm across the common and confess her own mistake, and ask Belinda's pardon.

While she was pondering on what she had better do, or what it would be *right* and wise to do, she heard some one knocking at the door. It was Mrs. King, who was growing alarmed at Esther's absence.

"Why, my child, where hast thee been all day?" asked the motherly voice; and the kind eyes saw that Esther's face was stained with tears, and that she was looking very miserable. "Is anything wrong, my dear? The farmer and me got so uneasy when you never came home to your tea that I thought I would put on my bonnet and come and look after you. I should have been here an hour ago, only Mr. Blount came in to pay for the little pigs; and he wanted the brindled calf, and I had to go into the far Croft with him. Now, Esther, child, what is it?"

With many tears Esther told her story, not sparing herself by any means, and finishing up with, "What had I better do—what ought I to do, Mrs. King?"

"That we'll think about, my dear! Of course you must confess your error; but the Smiths are not people to whom it would be safe to humble yourself. They are a very uncomfortable set of people, and I had rather this had happened with any other girl in the village than with Belinda Smith. She'll take advantage, I am afraid, if you tell her she was right; and yet she *must* know, it would be deceitful and sinful to let her suppose she was wrong after all. Wrong in *her conduct* of course she was, but not wrong in *her reckoning*."

"She knew she was right all the time. She could do the sum as well as I! I do not wonder, with her temper, that she turned restive and obstinate. Oh, I am so sorry, Mrs. King: but there, I am not fit for the situation; I said I was not! I am too ignorant and too undisciplined. I had better give it up."

"Tut! nonsense, my dear! We all make mistakes. We elderly people blunder and do stupid, wrong things sometimes, even when we are proposing to ourselves to do well and wisely. And you, a young thing of seventeen, it would be a wonder indeed if you never made mistakes! My dear, it's a grand thing to know you are wrong, and to have grace to own it. This fuss, which was partly of your own making, has tried you sadly, and may try you yet; but it will do you no harm in the end, my love. We all have to buy experience, and this will be a lesson to you; I learnt it with my own children long ago. Never give a decisive command, unless you are quite sure that you will be able to enforce obedience—the contest in such cases does more harm than a little; it hurts the child, and it hurts the parent or teacher quite as much. I remember once hastily saying to my little Bessie that she should not have her dinner till she had said '*thank you!*' Oh! I wished my tongue had been blistered before it had uttered such a thing. She was an obstinate child now and then, and she *wouldn't* say '*thank you!*' And I had to keep that baby of four years old without a bit of anything but dry bread till quite late at night. She was conquered at last, but I never wanted such another victory; it cost too much! I took care never to make such strenuous conditions again. I don't think much good is done if you have to *force* your child to obedience. But now, my dear, let us go home, or the farmer will be here after us. I'll get you a nice bit of supper, and then you must go to bed and forget your trouble—it won't seem half so bad to-morrow."

And finally it was arranged that, if Belinda Smith did not come to school next day, Esther should write her a letter, acknowledging the truth, with all suitable concessions and
■ *regrets.*

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

CONTRARY to expectation Belinda Smith did come to school next day ; and as soon as prayers were over, and the business of the day about to commence, Esther rang the little bell, which was used to enforce immediate silence and attention, and prepared to address her scholars. Many of them supposed that Belinda Smith was about to be expelled, for already it was known that she had gone home after tea with her mother, and that she had so far successfully resisted the lawful authority as to leave her sum still untouched. It was also known that Mrs. Smith had "spoken her mind," and all the girls wondered whether the combat was to be renewed.

"You know," said Sarah Lee, again speaking to Mary Murrell, "that as Miss Kendall said outright and positive that the sum should be done, she was bound to have it done, and she's bound now to have it done if Linda stops in the school, or else there will never be any proper rule again. But I don't think it was very sensible of Miss Kendall to do such a thing with a girl like Linda ; we all know what she is. I wonder whether it will all go on again to-day."

"I should think not," said Mary, sadly. She had worked the sum herself early that very morning, and she, too, had made the result exactly to agree with Linda's. She began to suspect that the governess was in error, and if the contest were to be renewed she meant humbly and privately to tell Esther how she had worked the sum, and failed to find in Belinda's figures one mistake. And Mary Murrell was the head girl in arithmetic, and loved her teacher, to whom she had never said a disrespectful word. But Esther quickly solved the mystery. Her colour deepened as she glanced round the room, and saw Belinda looking sullen and defiant still, and all the elder girls curiously regarding her, and the little ones wearing most astonished countenances.

"Girls," said Esther, in a clear, firm voice, "I am very *sorry for what occurred yesterday*, more sorry than I can say,

that Belinda Smith was punished and shamed before you all, for so far as her sum was concerned she was right. The error was mine, or rather that of the "Key" to which I trusted. From first to last her figures were all correct, and I blame myself that, instead of relying on the printed answer, I did not at once work the sum myself. Belinda, I cannot tell you how sorry I am, and I hope you will forgive me for the pain I caused you. You, too, were in fault, for you were rude and sullen, but I hope that will never be again. Let us begin afresh to-day, and try to understand each other better. I hope now we shall go on more happily."

Belinda was too astonished to reply ; no one had ever asked her forgiveness before, and when Esther came round and kissed her she submitted passively, though she did not return the salute. But as she bent over her books a few tears gathered in her eyes ; her heart was softened, for no one had ever kissed her that she could remember, except now and then her father when she helped him with his books, maternal caresses not being at all in Mrs. Smith's way.

And so the storm blew over. Belinda gave no further trouble, and it did not appear that Esther's authority had suffered. Only Mrs. Smith put herself in her way on the following Sunday coming out of church, and said, tauntingly, "So you was wrong after all, and my lass right !" And Esther replied, "Yes, it was my mistake, Mrs. Smith ; I am very sorry."

A few days passed by and it was June, and the country was all one flush of beauty. Esther came in from school one evening looking radiant and happy ; she had been having a sort of initiatory examination, and she found that nearly all the girls were very much improved. Also Belinda Smith had been strangely gentle and obedient, and she had brought her that morning an offering of field flowers, such as she knew her governess particularly loved. Esther sat down to tea in excellent spirits, ready to do justice to the nice cakes which Mrs. King always made on baking-day. She was looking very nice in a pretty pink and white print dress, with snowy *collar and neat cuffs*, and her rich black hair smoothed, *and plaited round her shapely head*. It was quite a

different Esther from the one who had lived so dearly in Queen Square. The table was well spread; not only were there hot cakes, but brown bread and white, pats of golden butter, a plate of cool, green salad, some blackberry jam, some fine honey, and last, not least, a dishful of early strawberries. It was the farmer's birthday, and Mrs. King kept high festival on all such anniversaries.

Esther was giving back her cup to be replenished, and talking gaily all the while, when she suddenly started and ceased speaking. The garden gate swung back with a clang, and up the walk came a young man with a swaggering air that seemed strangely familiar to Esther Kendall. Could it be Dick Hellicar? Esther's heart for a moment seemed to stop breathing, and she felt sick and cold, while the morsel of cake in her mouth turned at once to something little better than dust and ashes. What could he possibly want with her? Had the Hellicars determined to claim her till she was of age, and had they the power so to do? And had they sent Dick of all people to take her back again?

"What is it, Esther?" asked the farmer, dropping a piece of honeycomb upon the table-cloth.

"I think it is my cousin, Dick Hellicar, coming up the walk," was the faint reply.

"Your cousin? We must show him some hospitality, then. Wife, is there plenty of tea in the pot? Perhaps the young man would prefer some cold meat or a rasher of ham to these sweet things." And the farmer bustled out into the porch to welcome with all due honours Esther's London cousin.

Mr. Dick came in with his usual swagger, patronising the farmer and greatly astonishing Mrs. King with his cool free-and-easy ways. Yes, he would like a slice of cold beef hugely, if it were not too fat, and ham—yes, a rasher of ham as well, for he was confoundedly hungry. As for tea, he didn't know; at any rate, he would like a good pull at the ale-jug first.

"And are they all quite well?" asked Esther, trying to make conversation.

"Well, no; nobody's been well since you went away, but

you did quite right. I wouldn't have you go back for any money. My father's about the same, and Biddy is about the same, only she is going to be married to some Paddy or another. But the children are bad, very bad. That wretched little Tommy goes into fits like fun, and Fanny's going to hook it soon, I think. As for the baby, if it is a baby, it doesn't get on a bit. Its legs double up under it, and its head waggles like a mandarin's, poor little urchin ! It would be a mercy if the Lord would take it."

And Dick tried to look solemn and decorous.

"And aunt Myra?—the sick children must try her very much."

"I believe you ! They do just, and Lizzie is not any help ; indeed, she's a trouble, for though she's only a child, she isn't as steady as a girl should be. She's a horrid, fast, mean, spiteful little wretch ! And Mrs. Hellicar is in the dumps, for there's going to be another baby. I wonder what she means by it. I've told her I'm going to make tracks at once ; I'm not going to stop in a house full of squalling children and nothing else. Such women as Mrs. Hellicar ought never to be allowed to be married ; a man might just as well set up a rag-doll by his fireside as such a poor, weak, vain, silly, fibbing fool as she is ! I'm looking for a wife with sense and spirit."

And he gave Mrs. King a knowing glance and a sly wink, as much as to say he took her into confidence ; whereat Mrs. King felt excessively disgusted.

More questions were asked and answered, and then Dick condescended to admire Chilcombe, saying that it was a very pretty place, but dull enough he should think.

"And you seem to have a nice place here, sir," he continued, addressing Mr. King ; "I saw some fine ricks as I was coming round the corner, and some splendid cattle were being driven into the yard close by. I suppose they were yours ? Yes ; I concluded so. I daresay you've some fine fat porkers in the sty, and your good lady there her poultry yard. Ah ! it's fine to be a farmer ! If I'd been brought *up in the country* I might have been a farmer myself ; but *now it would be too quiet a life for me. I like stir, and*

bustle, and plenty of action ; and I'm in for progress, sir, all for progress ! I'm in favour of manhood suffrage, and all that sort of thing."

The farmer replied that he was not, he didn't think it would answer ; but Mr. Dick airily informed him that he was quite mistaken, and he seemed anxious to commence a discourse on politics, only Mr. King politely declined to continue the conversation while the ladies were present ; and Dick, perceiving that Esther had finished her tea, was anxious to engage her attention, and get her away into some secluded spot where he might lay at her feet the magnificent prize of his hand, and heart, and fortune.

When he asked her to take him round the garden she could not well refuse, especially as he whispered—

"I've something particular to say, you know. I've come down on purpose."

She would rather not have listened, but she felt that it could not be avoided ; it could not be anything very pleasant, but on the whole it seemed best to hear what he had to say as quickly as possible, that it might be over. Also, it would be best that she alone should hear what he might have to tell her, for Dick *could* say a great deal she would not wish her friends to hear. Never before had she felt so utterly ashamed of belonging to the Hellicars.

Finding himself among the rose bushes Dick lost no time.

"Esther," he began, "do you know you've grown very handsome ? I should scarcely have known you. Why, you look quite the lady !"

And he tried to take her hand, but Miss Kendall coldly withdrew her fingers, and daintily held up the flowing skirt of her pretty pink dress.

Dick's wooing was of the most abrupt ; his next speech was—

"I say, Hetty, give us a kiss !"

And he would have taken one, had not his cousin drawn back, like a young duchess, as he told his father afterwards, and haughtily declined the salutation.

"Now but, Esther, that's too bad ! and I came all the way down here on purpose."

"On purpose to kiss me?"

"Yes; and I hope I'll have you to kiss for many a day. Esther, I've made up my mind to marry you."

"Have you indeed!"

He did not perceive the satire in her tone; he thought that she meant that she could hardly believe such blissful news.

"Yes," he went on, getting quite sprightly, "yes; I've meant to do it ever since you went away, and before. And I'll be honourable; I swear my intentions are honourable. We'll settle the day at once, and we'll be married in that church yonder, and the old buffer in there can give you away. I've got into a nice thing now; I've given up the commission line; it *don't pay*, you see; and I'm—in—the *law*, I may say now. I'm leaving London and going to Birmingham; and you shall have a fine house, Esther, and plenty of good dresses, and lots of servants; and, if I can manage it, a nice little four-wheeler and a useful nag. I mean to be a gentleman. I am not going to the wall like my father for the want of a bit of pluck. And you shall be a lady, as you've a right to be. I've heard the governor say if the Kendalls were poor they'd good blood in their veins. Oh, Esther, my dear, we'll be as happy as the days are long, and Mrs. Hellicar may go on having weedy babies, and eating her heart out with vexation and envy; when we come to a carriage and pair and a footman, we'll call upon them, my love, and leave our cards. Won't that be fine? Come, I may take a kiss now surely! We are all but husband and wife."

But Esther stepped back resolutely, and Dick stood amazed.

"Cousin Dick, you *are* my cousin, and I wish you well; but I can never be your wife."

"And why not?"

"I do not—love you."

"Oh! all girls say that; but the love will come fast enough if you give it head. If that's all I don't care——"

"*But I do!* Dick, let me go! or I will call those men in *the rick-yard*. I shall never love you, never even like you."

I would as soon—nay, sooner—be transported than pledge myself to you.”

“That’s plain speaking, at all events. And what’s the matter with me? Ain’t I a likely young fellow for any girl especially a girl as hasn’t got a stiver of her own?”

“The matter with you is that you are not good—that you don’t fear God—that—that—oh! Dick, you know that I know all about you. You are not even commonly *honest*! How could you come down here on such an errand?”

“And you mean to say it’s a fool’s errand? You will never have me?”

“*Never*, Dick!”

“You’ll repent some day.”

“I shall never repent.”

“But I’ll make you! I’ll be revenged, you proud minx! you impudent jade, you! I’m not to be despised for nothing, I can tell you; neither man nor woman shall thwart Dick Hellicar without paying for it dearly—dearly! No! I won’t kill you. I’ll do worse than that; I’ll make you long for death! You shall be humbled yet, for I’ll take away your character, my fine young lady! A word here, and a word there, and a significant whisper or two, and it’s done; it don’t cost much! Oh! I shall see you humbled yet, and a-wishing you were honest Mrs. Richard Hellicar, as you might have been, by this day month.”

And he tore away, leaping the lavender hedge, not staying to bid farewell to Mr. and Mrs. King.

“I’m glad you spoke out, my dear,” said Mrs. King. “Such as he want a plain answer. Don’t cry, Esther; we’ll hope the next lover may be more acceptable; there’s plenty of time yet, and I know you are in no hurry to get a sweetheart. I am so glad he is gone.”

“I thought he was a doubtful customer,” said the farmer; “and I wonder what he came down here for without giving us a minute’s notice. I suppose that fine chain he wore across his waistcoat wasn’t gold?”

CHAPTER XXVII.

"LITTLE ELLIE."

"ESTHER, my lass, would ye mind walking to Helmsley Grange this evening?" asked the farmer, as they sat at tea one evening, just before the Midsummer vacation commenced.

"I should like the walk very much, if I may take Rover. Do you wish to send any message to the Grange, Mr. King?"

"Yes. I promised Mr. Digby that I would let him know to-day whether I would take to that rick of his; indeed, there were two ricks he thought of parting with, and I would not close with him till I saw how the markets went to-day at Stannington. I was not quite clear that he was acting fairly; at least, I demurred about the price, and now I am sure that I shall just be cutting my own throat if I pay him what he offers. I will write a note while you put on your hat, and tell him what I think of the bargain, and also what I *will* give him; and if he says anything, Esther, tell him that's my—my—what is it, Mary?"

"Your *ultimatum*, I suppose."

"Yes, that's it; only people do use such grand words now-a-days. How my old father would have stared if he had heard a farmer talk about his *ultimatum*!"

Esther went upstairs smiling, not exactly at Mr. King's "*ultimatum*," but at the decision and self-complacency with which it was announced; for the matter had been gone into on the previous Saturday evening while she was present, and the farmer would certainly have agreed to Mr. Digby's terms, had not his wife suggested the impolicy of making a contract which might possibly be injurious to himself. Mrs. King was a sensible woman, and she threw out suggestions where one less truly wifely would have triumphed in displaying her own superior tact and wisdom; and she always contrived that all bargains should be ostensibly concluded by *her* husband, and that he should at least have the credit of *conducting his business himself*. And he, good man, took *very kindly to the notion*, and adopted the ideas of his

clever, practical wife with so much facility, that after a while he quite considered them as his own, and would have been extremely surprised had anyone hinted to him that he was trading on borrowed sagacity and acquired prudence! Yet he always declined to give his "*ultimatum*" in matters of the slightest importance, without first "talking to my wife about it." It was his chief regret that she could not attend the markets with him; and for this privation he indemnified himself as well as he could, by talking over "prices" and probable offers beforehand, and by consulting her upon such bargains as still remained unclosed when he returned home in the evening. For Mrs. King understood a sample of wheat or barley, or a bag of beans, as well as any experienced corn-factor in the country.

"There is the note," said the farmer, when Esther came down ready for her walk. "Thee hadst better ask to see Mr. Digby, if he is in; if not—well! I'd rather thee didst *not* ask for that young spendthrift, Rupert: not but what he would be courteous to thee; but he is no hand at business, and I prefer to have my dealings with the old man, though he is rather too close-fisted for my liking."

"And if you are not at home before nine o'clock, my dear," said Mrs. King, "I will send Jem to meet you, or come myself, if I've done that ironing; but the master's shirts do take a season, and I couldn't trust them to Patience—fine work she would make with the ruffled fronts, I trow! You had better come back by the lane; it is dark in the wood so early; and there is Rover waiting for you: he is a famous *beau* for you, Esther, and a trusty one and a safe one, too!"

"Indeed he is, and I am quite content with him. I only hope no more *beaux* will come troubling me for at least five years. Come, Rover, good fellow."

"You are quite right, Esther," said Mrs. King as she walked with the girl down the path to the gate. "As my mother used to say, matrimony is no yield if it's jumped into rashly, or undertaken too soon. Be a girl as long as you can, Esther; the days will come when you must be a woman, and *girlhood comes but once*, and is soon over; while womanhood,

with its cares and responsibilities, lasts as long as you live—it may be for half a century or more. Dear [me! when I see young creatures of sixteen or eighteen so keen after a husband, and what they hold to be the privileges of a matron, I feel as sorry for them as I do for a child that's running about so heedlessly that he is sure to tumble down and come to grief ere long. They're just flinging away the happiest part of their lives—the part, too, that God has given them for learning the ways of the world, and knowing their own minds, and getting experience. The world would be a deal happier and a deal better if boys and girls would not rush into matrimony the moment they are free of lesson-books. My master was only twenty-one when he asked me. I and my sister were at his outcome, and there was a dance in that very barn there; and he took me out for a breath of air, he said, and we went and sat under the old hawthorn in the long-croft, and watched the moon come up from behind the Helmsley woods yonder, and he asked me there and then to be his wife. I was nothing loth, but I said I'd ask my mother; I was only nineteen, you see, and girls were meeker and shyer in those days. But my mother, though she thought well of William, said, 'Not yet awhile, my lass; not yet. Let him be his own master for a bit; let him know his own mind. He thinks he does now; every man thinks that, till he finds out his mistake; but he don't, he can't, till he has been tried. If he is worth having, if he wants thee in real good earnest, he will wait, and be glad too; if he changes his mind, still well and good. Twenty-five don't often pick what twenty-one would take; and if either man or woman makes a mistake in marriage, it can't be undone, remember! You may make the best of it, but a mistake is a mistake for all that; and a life-long mistake yields plenty of trial and disappointment, though, by God's great mercy, it may turn to good at last.' And I hearkened to my mother, for she'd lived in the world before I was born, and knew things that I didn't; and thirty years ago we didn't set up at seventeen or twenty for the sense and wisdom of three-score. And I told *William* I couldn't be his sweetheart then; but if he stayed *in the same mind* three years longer, maybe I'd listen to him.

But I wouldn't make or take any promise ; we were both to be quite free. However, he did know his own mind, it seemed, for the day he was twenty-four he came again, and said he had seen many a lass that a man might fancy, but never a one that suited him as I did ; and so we were engaged, and twelve months afterwards we were married ; and though we've had our trials, we've been happier than most ; and if it was all to come over again, I'd marry him to-morrow before all other men on earth ! And if a woman can say that from her heart, when she has been nigh upon thirty years a wife, she is a happy woman, Esther Kendall, in spite of all the changes she may have seen ; for married life brings its cares and its worries as well as its joys and comforts, I can tell you ; and there's sunshine and rain in all our lives, and thorns among the roses ; the good Lord orders it so, that we may not get our hearts fastened to this world by too many and too strong ties. Now I'll go back ; I've come quite a long way without my bonnet, and I've been preaching a regular sermon."

Esther went on her way along the flowery lane — the pleasant Helmsley-lane, with its bowery hedges all garlanded with lovely briar-roses, and clinging briony and fragrant honeysuckle. And the brook kept up its pleasant tune beside her, and the birds sang sweetly, and the aspen leaves quivered and made a gentle murmur in the hush of the beautiful June evening. It was all very fair, and again Esther felt as if she ought to sing hymns of praise for the glory of the happy summer-tide, and all the splendour of the earth and sky. The discontent that had darkened her days a little while ago had passed away ; that uncomfortable little affair with Belinda Smith had been like a thunderstorm, clearing the atmosphere of her thoughts, scattering the lurid clouds of ingratitude and gloom, and freshening and brightening her perception of the many blessings showered about her path.

"Yes," she soliloquised, "Mr. Guise was right when he said we were ourselves allowed to give the colouring to our lives. 'All is not gold that glitters,' certainly, and *golden surroundings do not always make golden lives.* Oh ! I must

be thankful ; I must never repine any more. When I reflect how changed is my lot, and how much God has done for me, my heart *must* overflow ! And yet, it was heavy enough not long ago. Dear me ! what inconsistent, thankless creatures we are—at least I am. I suppose I ought not to pronounce judgment on my fellow-mortals. I am afraid I am rather fond of finding out other people's blemishes, and philosophising about other people's faults, and I am sure Esther Kendall's mistakes and shortcomings are quite enough for me to attend to. Why can't we see ourselves as others see us, I wonder ? Somebody of old said, 'Know thyself.' Excellent advice, but not very easy to follow. Then, the excuses we contrive for ourselves when we do admit ourselves to be in the wrong ! the allowances we make, the juggling sort of game we are so apt to play with our consciences, making a dummy, in short, of conscience ; dummy, of course, always getting the worst of it ! And to think of Dick wanting to marry me ! I can scarcely believe that it is true he came down here courting *me*—me of all the people in the world. I could fancy I dreamt it—one does dream such absurdities ; or I could imagine I had read it in a story-book, or been told it about some one else. Well ! I shall never have reason to be proud of my first offer, that is certain. Even if Dick were honest, and honourable, and gave promise of a thriving future, I could not marry him. How much this subject has come before me of late ! first of all there was that talk about love that I had with Miss Cecil ; then Dick rushes down as if he expected to ask and have as a matter of course ; and then Mrs. King discourses on matrimony. Well ! I suppose there is no harm in thinking about it, if one only thinks wisely and soberly. Oh ! how I do hate all that silly chatter about *beaux* that is so general with girls. They don't mean any harm by it, but they do themselves no end of harm, and hurt others too, by *playing at love* ! It is almost as bad as playing at religion ; in some ways I think it is quite as bad. I suppose everybody's turn comes some day ! I can't call Dick's coming my *turn* ; I wonder when it will be !”

And deep in thought Esther moved on in the green

shadows of the trees, for she was in the wood now, and Rover was improving the occasion by snuffing and routing at the rabbit-holes with considerable vigour. She rested for a few minutes on the gnarled oak-root where she had sat on Good Friday on her way home from Helmsley church. The wood looked very different from what it was three months ago. The mellow light of the June evening shone through the boles of the great trees; the wild strawberry-beds, and the moss carpet at her feet, wore now the true rich emerald tint; the straight stems of the tall pines stood up like bronzed pillars against a background of silvery birches, and feathery larches, with here and there bright gleamings of a soft, unclouded blue. And lovely green ferns were springing, some only half uncurled from their winter's sleep, where before was only barren rock, or last year's withered fronds. And here Esther went on with her thinking; and presently Rover, feeling, perhaps, that he was not conducting himself quite as discreetly as might have been expected from a dog of his respectability, came and lay down at her feet, looking up in her face, as if wanting to know very much why she was so grave and thoughtful, and why she did not talk to him as her only companion. And then he crept closer to her, settling himself on the hem of her dress, and began to beat his tail upon the ground, and make a little low whine, as if he were out of spirits, and wanted just a little cheering, a little conversation by way of passing away the time which hung heavily upon his paws, and also by way of diverting his attention from the rabbits, on which his mind dwelt regretfully in spite of all the prickings of his canine conscience.

"What is it, Rover?" Esther said at last. "Are you very dull, poor doggie? Now, doggies cannot have all they want any more than human creatures; so you must be patient. No, I don't want to be licked. I wish you would show your affection in some other way. There, lie down, and be patted, and I will talk to you. Do you know, Rover, that young man you barked and growled at—you wanted to have a tussle with him, didn't you?—that young man came down here, all the way from London, on purpose to ask me

to be his wife? I should as soon have thought of your making such a proposition, Rover! And he behaved very badly when he found that he had troubled himself to no purpose. He was horribly rude and fierce, and threatened all sorts of wicked vengeance. I don't think, however, he will carry his threats into execution; indeed, I do not think he can, for I have asked God to take care of me, and hide me from the strife of tongues. But I suppose the right person will come some day, and I wonder what he will be like. I think I shall make up my mind like that 'little Ellie' in the poem did; only I shall not dip my feet in the water; some one might come by, and I should look very foolish. But like 'little Ellie' I am sitting alone, 'mid the beeches, by a stream-side too; and like her I will choose what sort of person my lover shall be, though when he comes, if ever he do come, which, after all is doubtful, I shall not concern myself to show him a 'swan's nest among the reeds.' For one reason that there is none to show, that I know of; but there is a moor-hen's nest in that little pool where the trees bend over, and Jem says he saw a coot flying across the stream one day. Well, now for my lover; 'little Ellie' wanted a knight on a red-roan steed of steeds, I remember, and the creature was to be shod in silver, and housed in azure—very unreasonable of Ellie, I think. Then he was to ride away through the world, putting away all wrong, making the crooked straight, and doing all sorts of wonderful actions, and he was to send her his foot-page with all sorts of tokens and messages, till at last he should come back himself, and kneeling at her feet proclaim—

“ ‘I am a duke's eldest son,
Thousand serfs do call me master,
But, O Love, I love but *thee*!’

All very well in a fanciful poem, but most unsatisfactory in real life, and Ellie's lover will not do for me. A knight on a red-roan steed, with a young foot-page and a thousand serfs, would not be at all in my way; and I am afraid, too, Ellie *was rather a silly little person*, else she would never have *injured up an ideal lover*, just that she might show him

‘that swan’s nest among the reeds!’ Now let me choose: I wonder who will be the sillier, Ellie or I? Must my lover be handsome? I scarcely know. I think not what is *vulgarly* called handsome; but his face must bear the impress of high, pure thought and noble aspirations. It must be bright with genius, with intellect, and with all the graces of a genuine piety; for, above and before all things, he must be a Christian man. His nature must be strong, and yet tender; he must have firmness, stability of purpose, constancy and courage, yet discretion. He must love beautiful things, and he must be gentle as he is enthusiastic and high-minded. Also, and chiefly, he must love me next to his God; he must give me all his heart; he must feel that I, and I only, am the woman of his choice; and if all the other women in the world were at his disposal, he would claim me in the face of them all! Is this too much to ask—to wish for? I think not, for I should give him back measure for measure. He would be my king, my master, my whole world; and everything that I said, or did, or planned, would have primary reference to him. I should rejoice in rendering to him that loving obedience which must be so sweet to a true woman. But then he must be wise as kind, and noble as tender, and strong-hearted as pure, or I could *not* obey! It must be galling, indeed most horrible, to obey *ONLY* from duty, or, worse still, from something little short of compulsion. I fancy the reason why so many women protest against the lawful authority of the other sex is because they make such marriages as render obedience all but impossible, or at best a root of bitterness. Yes! my lover, when you come, I will submit my whole soul to you; for you will not be my lover unless my soul cleaves to your soul, and unless I know you for one of God’s great, good men! You will not command me, for there will be nothing tyrannous, nothing despotic, in your nature; but I shall divine your wishes and your will, and know by instinct what it is you would have me do, and what you would like me to leave undone; being certain, all the while, that your will and your desire were grounded on the *truest, highest* principles. I shall sit at your feet, *dear*, and learn all wisdom and all goodness; and I shall

listen to your words, and drink in your teaching, till my mind becomes the reflex of yours, and we are knit together spirit to spirit, as well as heart to heart. Then, if God should try us with poverty or wealth, prosperity or adversity, it will be all one ! With His great love in our souls, and His face shining upon us, and our own deep, unassailable trust in each other, we must be happy ! With our true and consecrated affection, faithful unto death, what could harm us ? Except, indeed, that parting which must come sometime—which *might* come in the very summer of our days ! But no ! even that would not be unmitigated pain ; for such love would oversweep the grave. It would not be, like some poor, so-called loves I have seen and heard of, all of the earth, earthy. It would have in it the divine, celestial element which would give it entrance into God's own heaven ; and there it would be perfected and made immortal !

“ Am I longing for impossibilities, I wonder ? Am I yet more foolish than ‘ little Ellie ’ ? In one sense *no*, for there are such men as I have pictured : I think there may even be a good many such ; for I find the world, on the whole, so very much better than I fancied it when I was quite shut out from it. Still, they would never be in the majority ; there will always be an overplus of selfishness, and untruth, and fickleness, and base mercenary motive, while this dispensation lasts ; but as the good, the very good, the BEST, does exist, I will wait till it comes to me, or else I will never marry.

“ So far I am not foolish in thus setting up an ideal, which is often all real enough ; but, alas ! I am foolish to infatuation in expecting that such goodness should ever come to me. Who and what am I, that strength and sweetness, power and refinement, truth and tenderness, genius and piety, should single *me* out from among my sisters, and say, ‘ This shall be my wife ? ’ What can I give back to such a one except my love ? But I have read somewhere that no sensible man troubles himself to seek for a perfect woman, but rather seeks for one who shall harmonize with him as perfectly as may be—for I suppose no two minds, any more than two faces, were *ever*, in all respects, in complete unison. There must be just *some little shades* of difference ; but still there should be the

harmony which alone can set the psalm of life to a glorious tune, sweet and jubilant, and full of melody. It just strikes me that some of these thoughts must have been suggested by a sentence or two I copied out of a book I read at the Chenies. Cecil said she liked the book for its thoroughness, but she almost laughed at some of its talk about love and marriage. Such a standard, she said, was unreal, mythical, a mere delusion, a sort of finely painted picture which could never be anything but a picture. I have my note-book in my pocket: I will read that extract that made her declaim so fiercely against women writers:—

“ ‘ . . . One clear truth; that after God and the right—which means all claims of justice and conscience—the first duty of any two who love truly is towards one another. I have thought since that if this truth were plainer seen, and more firmly held by those whom it concerns, many false notions about honour, pride, self-respect, would slip off; many uneasy doubts and divided duties would be set at rest; there would be less fear of the world, and more of God—the only righteous fear. People would believe more simply in His ordinance, instituted “from the beginning,”—not the mere outward ceremony of a wedding, but the love which draws together man and woman until it makes them complete in one another in the mystical marriage union, which once perfect should never be disannulled. And if this union begins, as I think it does, from the very hour each feels certain of the other’s love, surely to talk about giving one another up, whether from poverty, delay, altered circumstances, or compulsion of friends—anything, in short, except changed love or lost honour—is about as foolish and wrong as attempting to annul a marriage. Indeed I have seen many a marriage that might have been broken with far less unholiness than a real troth-plight.’ ”

“I am glad a woman thought that, and had the courage to write it. She must be a thoroughly good, pure-minded woman, I am sure. After all, I am not so very silly.

“And I am very sorry for little Ellie, for even if she found her peerless lover, I do not think she would be happy; for when they had been married a few years he would tire of her, however good he might be. How dreadful to have one’s husband tired of one, to see that he lived a life apart in which one could never share, to know he was kind and true *only* from principle or honour. Better by far *be an old maid*; oh, yes! better a thousand times. Far

happier, far more honourable the lonely woman with truth and universal charity in her heart, than the married woman who feels that the best part of wedded life is lost, or that for her it never has existed."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN OLD COUNTY FAMILY.

HELMSLEY GRANGE was a fine old house of the Elizabethian period, standing in its own broad, well-wooded acres—such of them, at least, as were not sold or mortgaged—with a broad stream flowing through its demesne, a rich meadowland upon its bank, and with such covers for game as made the mouth of many a sportsman water, and his fingers tremble with impatience, when people made mention of the celebrated Helmsley partridges. The Grange was now half farm-house and half manor-house ; such of the land as could be sold had been sold, and the rest was so deeply mortgaged that nothing short of an El Dorado accession of wealth to the Digby family could possibly redeem it. The title-deeds of everything were with the lawyers ; the shooting and the fishing were let, to the bitter grief and unconcealed mortification of the squire's three sons, Lancelot, Rupert, and Cuthbert—commonly known as Cuddie ; and as for the family plate, the family jewels, and the old family retainers, they had long been dissipated—the servants seeking other and more prosperous masters, and the silver and the gems finding their way by degrees to a very aristocratic metropolitan "*Mont-de-piété*." A few silver spoons, two or three insignificant heirlooms in the way of rings and brooches, and an antiquated drinking-cup, which had a legend attached to it, were all that remained to the Digbys of to-day of the splendid surroundings and ample plenishing which had once been theirs.

The Digbys were one of the oldest families in that part of the country. Their name occurred in Domesday Book, and again in *Magna Charta*, as lords of Helmsley. A Digby had fought at the battle of Cressy, and his grandson had fallen

covered with wounds and glory on the immortal field of Agincourt. The Digbys clung long and pertinaciously to the fated fortunes of the Red Rose of Lancaster, and for nearly a century they were in disgrace. But time cures all wounds, and even heals deadly feuds ; and again the Digbys were found in the royal favour, in the reign of that merry, jovial gentleman, Henry VIII.—for he was merry and jovial then, not having commenced his little quarrels with the Church ; nor even, in default of better kinds of amusement, taken to relays of wives, whose divorce and execution seem to have afforded him immense enjoyment. At the “Field of the Cloth of Gold” Reginald Digby disported himself, being chronicled as one of the most extravagantly apparelled and sumptuously surrounded of all the extravagant and sumptuous actors in that brilliant pageant. In that resplendent throng he was noted for the number of his retainers, the costliness of his temporary appointments, the beauty of his steeds, the gorgeousness of his housings, the ultra liberality with which he dispensed guerdon and largesse upon every opportunity. He was the first who involved himself—the first of the Digbys to find out that the ample fortune of a country gentleman may fall short of the demands made upon it by one accustomed to a courtly expenditure.

The pitiful needs of the Red Rose, and the fines and persecutions of the White Rose, had only for a time inconvenienced the house of Digby. Its sons had stayed at home and economised, and its daughters had lived quietly in the solemn old house at Helmsley, or else married with the gentry of the neighbourhood ; so that Sir Reginald, when he claimed his spurs from young bluff Harry Tudor, was richer than any Digby that had come before him. How he dissipated his riches I have shown.

He died young, leaving an impoverished but still fair estate to his young son Harry ; and Harry was a sober-minded youth, content to pass his days in the country, far removed from the turmoil and temptations of camp and court ; but still the star of the Digbys waned ; a fate seemed upon them, for they could not, or at least did not, prosper ; and when *the last of the Tudors* died broken-hearted, the squire of

Helmsley was fain to follow suit—not, however, because the Virgin Queen was gathered to her fathers, but because so many misfortunes came upon him and his, and because his calamities were more than he could bear. It was an age of enterprise just then. The New World was just becoming a reality to the people's minds, and tales were told round many a winter hearth, and beneath many a summer green-wood tree, of the Spanish galleons laden with silver—of the marvellous city of the Incas, and of its inexhaustible resources. There was no *Prescott* in those days, so people concocted a history of Peru for themselves, and a very fine story indeed they made of it. Shrines and palaces of pure gold, cornices of precious stones, draperies far exceeding the exquisitely-woven textures of the East, and serfs at discretion, were among the least of the wonders of that magic tale. What wonder that many believed to their undoing?

There were no flash "Companies Limited" in those days, with chairmen of straw and mythical directors to delude the simple and unwary; but wholesale trickery and fraud are not peculiar to the nineteenth century; only the rail, the press, the electric wires, and general progress, offer extensive facilities to a man who does not hesitate to make prey of his fellow-creatures; and they also proclaim, even to the uttermost parts of the earth, when the bubble bursts, and the swindler comes to grief, or inexplicably disappears from mortal view. And there were schemers and adventurers, who were perhaps only half cheats, since they were themselves partially deceived, who, two centuries and a half ago, were willing to risk their own fortunes and those of their friends in wonderful and unheard-of speculations beyond seas. And sometimes the speculations succeeded, and men grew rich at express speed, and fortunes were really created which raised the admiration and envy of those who had not dared to stake their substance in a throw which seemed so doubly hazardous, because the game was to be played out in a realm so shadowy, so ethereal as a "New World." To old-fashioned and sober-minded people it seemed very much like casting dice with the *man in the moon*, or with some presumed inhabitant of *Jupiter*!

Harry Digby and his son and heir, Lancelot Digby, both made ventures which were disappointing ; they were prudent enough not to stake their all, and they lost what would be considered a mere *bagatelle* in these days of respectable commercial gambling ; still it was enough seriously to reduce an already impoverished estate. Lancelot Digby died young ; he was found drowned one day in the calm, clear stream which meandered through his paternal acres. Whether his death were accident, or something yet more terrible, no one ever knew ; but it was told abroad that he had missed his way in the foggy autumn night, and fallen into the river, where it was the deepest. Rupert, his brother, reigned in his stead—a wild, roystering cavalier, who never dreamed of mending his fortunes, but seemed rather anxious to dissipate the residue yet left ; and from that time to the present it had been a hard struggle with the Digbys of Helmsley Grange to live at all. One old custom after another fell into desuetude, retrenchment followed upon retrenchment, sacrifice upon sacrifice, and still an inexorable fate which would not let them lift their struggling heads above the water pursued them. Now they were sinking, now for a little while swimming, faintly dreading every turn of the stream and every swell of the current ; ever fighting against wind and tide, wearily, wearily, wearily, not knowing but that the next hour would see them overwhelmed and *all* lost irretrievably.

The Digby of Helmsley, to whom Esther Kendall was conveying farmer King's note, was a grave, taciturn, stern-featured man of fifty, or thereabouts. To all the troubles of his race one more was added in his person ; the Digbys had never been plagued with large families, which seem naturally to go with small incomes ; but Maurice Digby's olive-branches flourished round about his table—that table too often scantily supplied—as luxuriantly as if he had been a starveling curate or an unsuccessful author. He had married early, and for love ; and from this union, which was unexceptionally happy, proceeded the three sons already named, and Edith an only daughter. Soon after the birth of the latter, he became a widower, and most deeply he sorrowed for the gentle and lovely wife, in whose early grave seemed buried all life's

happiness ; and it was generally believed, as years passed on, and he made no second choice, that he would continue faithful to the memory of his first love, and never marry again.

He did, however, marry again ; but the second Mrs. Digby never filled the place of the first. He brought her home one day when Edith was about eight years old, and the three lads at once raised the standard of revolt against a step-mother. Edith was only frightened, and cried when the servants injudiciously told her that “ Now papa would never care for her again.” And “ papa ” was all the world to Edith ; to be with him was to enjoy an earthly paradise ; to be far away from him was a little less than penal banishment.

The new Mrs. Digby was handsome, showy, selfish, and indolent ; and to crown all, she was, as the whole neighbourhood said, “ no one in particular.” The first Mrs. Digby was visited because she was a Compton of Compton, and a Digby was a Digby, however reduced his circumstances ; but Digby or no Digby, no one paid much attention to the new wife, because, as Peter, the old coachman—now, alas ! cow-man, gardener, bricklayer, ploughman, Jack-of-all-trades—remarked, the present Mrs. Digby was “ nobody of nowhere.” It was she who contributed the larger number of the olive-branches, for in eleven years she trebled the number of her husband’s offspring, and now twelve young Digbys gathered round his board, counting in the baby, who was generally present in some one’s arms. The said baby was under twelve months old. Lancelot, the eldest son, was over twenty-five.

Esther thought how charming the Grange looked as she went towards it, crossing what was once the park, now broken up into convenient slips and lots of meadow-land. The sun shone grandly against the large windows looking to the west, and it was touching with golden and ruby tints the grey mellow stone and the mosses and lichens, which grew on coping, battlement, and buttress. There was some pretence at a flower-garden in the front of the house ; but it was evidently a very amateur affair, carried on under difficulties. It was evidently chiefly in feminine and childish *hands* ; there were a few common flowers, a few shrubs, and *several large trees*—a splendid sycamore, and two or three

walnut trees giving promise of abundant fruit. Not a creature was to be seen ; only a hen was doing a little comfortable scratching among the fresh-springing seedling mignonne, and a cat was sitting on the uppermost step of the broad flight which led to the hall-door, blinking her green eyes in the ruddy sunlight, and seriously contemplating the performances of her feathered friend. Pussy mewed a sort of welcome ; but no one else was in sight, and the hall-door stood wide open. There was a knocker, it was true, which Esther could just reach by standing on tip-toe ; but it was so huge, and looked so much as if it were never touched, that she hesitated to use it. She was just going to rap with her knuckles, when she heard a clear young voice singing—

“Douglas ! Douglas ! tender and true !”

Then the song broke off, and there was a sound of pattering feet, and the voice said, “Come back, Hughy ; come back, dear, and Sissy will sing such a pretty song !” But Hughy, with the perversity of his sex, disregarded the gentle entreaty, and came prancing and shouting into the hall, in the midst of which he presently stood, regarding Esther with mingled wonder and dismay. He was a fine little fellow of two years, or rather more, and, gravely declining Esther’s proffered hand, he trotted back to the parlour, where she heard him duly announcing her advent : “Great girl come in ! Hughy see girl—girl at door !” “What girl ?” asked the voice that had been singing. But Hughy only made answer : “Great girl ! big girl !—girl come in !”

“Please to step this way !” was the next thing Esther heard ; and, imagining this request to refer to herself, she at once complied with it, and followed Hughy into a large old-fashioned parlour, where sat a young lady, apparently a little older than herself, with a heap of unmended stockings in her lap, and a pile of dilapidated or rather worn-looking garments on the table before her.

“I beg your pardon,” said the young lady, whom Esther knew to be Edith Digby, for she had seen her before, and thought how fair and sweet, yet pensive, a face she had. “*I quite thought it was the girl from Dennett’s about the*

turkey-poults ; I expected her this evening. Please to sit down. Do you wish to see mamma ?”

“I have a note for Mr. Digby, from Mr. King of the Slade.”

“Papa is out now ; he went to Cheston-Magna this afternoon, but I expect him in directly, if you would not mind waiting a little. I daresay you can see him. And will you excuse my going on with my work ?—I have so much to do this week.”

And she looked laughingly at the heap of socks and stockings, which she went on diligently pairing while she spoke, glancing, too, at the mass of garments of all sorts and sizes with which the table was littered.

“Rather let me help you,” said Esther, drawing off her gloves.

“Oh, no, indeed ! I could not think of such a thing. Rest after your walk ; it is a long way from Chilcombe Slade.”

“I am not tired, for I rested a long while in the wood ; I fell to thinking, and scarcely knew how the time passed. Please let me have one of those pairs of socks.”

“Well, if you really would ! I must confess to being thankful for the smallest help. Was it not lovely in the wood ?”

“Yes,” replied Esther, settling herself, sock in hand, with a skein of cotton on her knee, and taking a darning-needle from what seemed to be the family pincushion. “It is almost a pity to be indoors on such an evening ; do you often walk in Helmsley Wood ?”

“Not often ; I have so much to do—there are so many little ones, and mamma is so very often poorly. And the fact is, we are not rich. I have to make and to mend, and to turn and to return, and so we never come to an end of the sewing. I sometimes speculate on the foot of a stocking, and wonder whether there is half an inch of the original fabric left in it ! One darns it first quite neatly, and then one darns the darns, not quite so neatly, of course ; and *lastly*, one cobbles as well as one can the darned darns, till *it becomes quite a work of art*, I assure you.”

“And do you like so much darning?”

“Well, *no*! Candidly I do not; only you know it is wisest to make the best of what is and must be; and there is really this advantage in darning, and in very plain sewing, that your fingers may be working away nimbly enough while your mind is far otherwise employed. Still, there is something unsatisfactory in this perpetual darning, for you seem to gain so little by it. You make the thing wearable, it is true; but next time it is washed it has all to be done over again. People say fashion is a tyrant—I think a straitened income is a tyrant of tyrants!”

“It is indeed! I know what it is to be very poor.”

“Do you indeed?” And then the two girls fell into a conversation, which, leading from one subject to another, made them feel quite intimate and confidential together. Esther told who she was, for Miss Digby was treating her as an equal, and poor as Edith Digby owned to be, she was really of the same class as Florence Guise and Cecil Uffadyne. But it made no difference; Edith talked on just as pleasantly, and at last asked Esther if she would come to Helmsley church sometimes on Sunday afternoons, and drink tea at the Grange. To such an extent Edith might go in inviting her friends and acquaintances.

Esther promised, and then she thought it was high time to be going home. The sun had gone down, and the red gleam was fading from the sky. As she rose up to depart a young man entered the room. It was too dark to see what he was like, but there was something in his tone which reminded her of Edith.

“My brother Rupert,” said Miss Digby. “He will do as well as papa. Rupert, here is a note from Mr. King.”

“Oh! about the barley-ricks, I suppose? I will see Mr. King to-morrow; my father will not be at home till very late, if at all to-night. Have you offered the young lady a glass of wine, Edith?”

Esther hastened to say she did not take wine, except medicinally, and that she must go directly, as she was to be met, and she did not want to bring either Mrs. King or the *servant too far on the road.*

"Put on your hat, Edith," said Mr. Rupert. "We might as well walk to the stone bridge with Miss Kendall."

CHAPTER XXIX.

POETRY IS NO YIELD.

THE next evening, when Esther came home from school, she inquired whether Mr. Rupert Digby had been to the Slade about the barley-ricks.

"Not he!" said the farmer; "I'll lay anything he has thought no more about it. I have no patience with that young man; no head for business, no punctuality, no anything to get him on in the world. But they're all alike, the unluckiest family in all the western counties, and they never seem to rouse themselves into doing anything that might change their luck. They do say a Digby was cursed by a priest of some sort that he turned out of house and home more than three hundred years ago; he was cursed in his house, and in his land, and in his posterity, till the end of time, and so no Digby has ever prospered since. But I don't believe such stories, neither does mother there. It isn't likely the good Lord would let curses come in that way!"

"No, indeed," said Esther; "I could never believe that. God does not punish the innocent for the guilty; nor would He give such power to a bad man's word, for the priest cannot have been good. No Christian would curse his enemy, whom Christ has commanded him to *love*."

"Ah, my lass, but that's a hard saying. Love won't come and go at will, even for friends; I wouldn't harm my enemy, but I could *not* love him!"

"You could love him enough to do him good, and that is what is meant, I fancy. And if one is kind to anybody, and concerned for his welfare, one comes, I think, to feel a sort of affection for him. It is not, and I should think it need not be, just the same kind of love as one feels for one's nearest and best friends, for there are different kinds of love, *as some one explained to me a little while since, especially the love that one has for near kindred and dearest ones, and*

the love that we are bound to render to all people according to their need. I could never, I am sure, feel the same warm, tender love for Mrs. Hellicar that I feel for Miss Guise and Mrs. King ; but I hope, if I could ever be a help or a comfort to her, I should not hesitate. But you were talking about the Digbys being unfortunate."

"Yes, they *are* unfortunate, and no mistake ; but I take it, it is very much their own fault. Why don't those young men do something ?"

"Are they idle, then ?"

"They are busy-idle ; at least Rupert and Cuddie are. They are about the farm all day long, doing or pretending to do something ; but nothing ever seems done rightly. They have no heart in their work, and the men follow suit, you see. Besides, unless they set to and earn their bread by the sweat of their brow, they are too thick upon the ground. What is the use of so many masters ? And masters, too, who don't know, or won't know, how things are to be done ? As for Lancelot, he never will be worth salt to his porridge ! At the very best, he could only earn his cheese, if some one found him in bread continually. Of course he is the eldest son and the heir ; but, dear me ! what is he heir to but embarrassments and debts and mortgages ? And I've been told that the Skinett mortgage is to be foreclosed, and then the old place must go ! I daresay some cotton-lord, or some wealthy Birmingham manufacturer, will buy the Grange, and perhaps pull it down and built up a spick-and-span new mansion, all plate-glass, and conservatories, and marble columns, on the old foundations. But I hope it will not be in my time. I've no love for the Digbys, but I should not like to see them turned out of their home. Yet it will come to that !"

"And about Mr. Lancelot ; does he not work at all ?"

"Well, he does a sort of work that is no yield. He is a mighty scholar, I suppose ; and he goes about the woods, and over Helmsley Down there, like one demented, with his hands crossed behind him, and his eyes gazing at nothing in particular. I met him last week mooning along, and he *nearly tumbled over me*. He was looking very seedy, I can

tell you ; he had on an old shooting-coat that was all but out at elbows, and his hat was a very bad one, and his beard and whiskers looked ragged, and his hair was all blown about. I never saw a more forlorn-looking figure. I bade him good-day, and he just started as if I'd said some unaccountable thing, and he nodded his head as if he wasn't quite sure it belonged to him, and went on just the same. I wonder he never falls into the big quarry up there ; it is unenclosed. Still, he is not a bad sort ; he doesn't drink or smoke—he don't even take a friendly pipe, I'm told ; and he wouldn't harm an insect. He is that kind to little children and dumb creatures, that people laugh at him and say he is half silly ; but that can't be, for I understand that he writes very grand *poetry*. I'm no judge, you know, and indeed I never saw any of his lines ; but them as have seen them and know something about the matter, say they are wonderful, and that he might be one of the first poets of the day ! But then, say I, what if he is ? That will never bring grist to the mill. Poetry never was any yield that ever I heard of ; it will never pay off mortgages, or redeem land, or fill barns, or keep up a house, as Helmsley Grange ought to be kept up—as it was kept up once in the old times, if all tales be true. They might make him chief poet, like him as wrote the 'May Queen' that you read to me the other night—and very pretty, touching verses they were, I must say—but then what would that be ? He would have the honour and a cask of sherry every year. He had better by far turn to some honest trade, and stick at it ; he would do far better. No ; poetry never was any yield, except to people born rich. Lord Byron wrote poetry ! Well, he could afford to ; but Lancelot Digby can't."

"I liked Miss Digby very much ; she seemed so simple and true ; I am sure she is good."

"So she is, so she is ; she is the stay of that household. Laws ! such a heap of children, and she is as good as a mother to them all, for their real mother is such a poor thing, all nerves, and whimsies, and ailments enough to drive *the College of Physicians* distracted. She is not unkind to *the first family*, I believe ; folks there say she is really fond

of Miss Edith ; but she's no manner of good in the house ; it would go on just as well without her. She lies on the sofa all day and reads story-books, I'm told ; and she encourages Lancelot in his nonsense. She was a fine woman when first the squire brought her home about eleven years ago, I should say ; she was large and fair, with a sleepily look in her blue eyes, and an air with her as if she wanted something or somebody to lean against. Some people do go through life, you know, seeking for leaning-posts, and she is one of them ; she is very good-tempered, if she can be at her ease. If the sky was falling she would lie still or sit still, and wait for somebody to come and save her, and be querulously miserable if they did not come post-haste. But give her what she wants, and she is not unamiable. She and Miss Edith get on very well, I believe ; but then the poor girl is housekeeper, and nursemaid, and governess, and sewing-woman. Yes ; you may well like Miss Digby, and if she should show at all friendly to you, why you can't do better. Ah ! here he comes, at last. He hasn't forgotten, then."

"Who is coming?"

"Mr. Rupert, about the barley-ricks, I reckon ; I would rather do business with the old squire, though."

Esther went upstairs to her room, and she did not see the farmer again till supper-time, and then he told her that the Squire had come to his terms, and that the barley-ricks were to be his ; "and," he said, in conclusion, turning to his wife, "I like that young fellow better than I ever did before ; he says he is going to try to get a situation of some sort ; he is determined not to waste time at Helmsley any longer, and I advised him to keep his determination, and not be beholden to any man."

"What can he do?" asked Mrs. King.

"Ah ! that is more than I can say ; of course he has had a good education, and he ought to be able to do something."

"I am afraid, William, he has not had a good education. He has not learned enough for a gentleman, and he has learned too much for a working man. The squire could not afford to send his boys to Eton or to Harrow, and then to college, as is the way with the real gentlefolk. They all

got the best they could at Thornibury Grammar School, except Lancelot, and he had twelve months with a private tutor. As for Cuddie, he never took to learning much ; he was a sportsman born. One would think he came into the world with a gun in his hand ; it seems as natural to him as the trunk is to the elephant."

"Indeed it does ! only too natural. I am sorry to say Cuddie Digby is to be seen sometimes in very questionable company. He and Red Giles, the poacher, are too good friends. I often wonder if his father knows it. Poor old squire ! He is beginning to look old ; he stoops, and he is quite grey ; and he is getting the look of a broken-hearted man. He has had a hard time of it, and his poor, helpless body of a wife has never been any comfort to him. He was quite a different man when the mother of these young men was alive. I remember her very well. She was a sweet-looking, gracious young lady, sensible, too, and things went better at the Grange in her day. She was a good religious woman, too ; Miss Edith is very like her, only I think not quite so pretty. And that reminds me, Esther, that Mr. Rupert brought a message from his sister. She hoped you got home safe last night, and she would be very glad if you would go to Helmsley church next Sunday afternoon, and then take tea with her at the Grange, and she and some one else would see you back again. I told Mr. Rupert I daresay you would come, but you would write a line to Miss Digby yourself. I suppose you will go ?"

"Do you think I had better, Mrs. King ?"

"I see no reason, my dear, why you should refuse. Miss Edith would be a very nice friend for you, and you might befriend her. There is many a little kindness you could show her ; and, poor girl, it is little consideration she gets. She is a complete slave to those younger children ; I have seen half-a-dozen of them hanging about her at once. A little talk with you will be a change for her. Yes, you must accept her invitation ; you will do each other good."

They were standing now all three just outside the porch, *watching the rising of the moon from behind the Helmsley woods.* Already it was silvering the tree-tops in the home-

copse, and Mr. King was beginning to yawn, and talk about bedtime; watching the moon, or the moonlit stream, was to him something like poetry, "no yield." He was just going, leaving the two women "to their moonshine," as he told them, when the gate swung back, and a tall figure, which Esther recognised in an instant as that of Oswald Uffadyne, came up the walk.

"I am a late visitor, Mrs. King," he said. "Miss Kendall, I beg your pardon! No, I will not go in to-night, thank you. I am on my way home, and Cecil will be wondering where I am. I come from Guise Court, Miss Kendall. Can you go to Florence?"

"Now?—to-night? Is anything the matter?"

"No, not to-night. As soon as you can, though. She is in great trouble, Esther, and she wants you! She thinks you would be a comfort to her. My uncle is going at last; it will soon be over now. You *will* go to her?"

"I will go to her the moment school is over to-morrow. Miss Cecil will come down with the rector, and they will give the prizes in the morning; and then the school will be closed, and I shall be free for a fortnight. It would have been three weeks, but I was laid by so long at Easter. I will go to Miss Guise at once, when the girls are gone."

"I will drive you over. I will take care not to turn you out this time."

"I am not afraid. I will be ready."

"Very well. I will tell Cecil. I am not sure whether she will go too. Somehow, you know, Flossy and Cecil—well! they do not get on together as swimmingly as I could wish. Cecil is too hard for Flossy—that is it."

"And is Mr. Guise so very ill?"

"He could not be much worse. Thank you for saying you will go, Miss Kendall; it is quite a relief to my mind. I know Flossy will find so much comfort in you. My poor, poor Flossy! Good-night, Mrs. King; I must hurry home. Cecil is very anxious."

"You *cannot* go to Helmsley on Sunday, now," said Mrs. King.

"Certainly not, Miss Guise comes before everybody. I will get up early to-morrow morning, and put up my things, so as to be quite ready the minute school closes. Oh, my dear, dear Miss Guise ! if I could but comfort you ! But no one but God can do that !"

"We will pray for her, my dear," said Mrs. King. "We can help her in that way, if in no other. Poor Miss Guise ! it will be hard for her, but for him a very blessed change !"

CHAPTER XXX.

A POINT CARRIED.

"I've been thinking I had better drive thee over to Guise Court myself, Esther, my lass," said the farmer next morning at breakfast. "What dost say, mother ?"

"Mr. Oswald said he would take her, and I do not think he will upset her again. Besides, she is not nervous."

"I didn't mean that. Esther has too much good sense to be afraid of the young man's driving, which I must say is excellent, because once he had an accident that might have happened to any one. What I mean is this : If Miss Cecil goes too, all well and good, but if she don't, and somehow I don't fancy she will, I think it would look better if I took Esther in our own tidy trap, with the old mare jog-trotting along, than if she were to be seen flying through the country behind a pair of ponies, driven by Mr. Uffadyne. I've naught to say against the young man, though I doubt if he's one that always knows his own mind ; but a girl's good name is like the bloom on a ripe plum—if you as much as touch it, it is gone."

"But Mr. Oswald is as good as a married man," replied Esther. "I think of him as Miss Guise's husband ; and he is so kind to me always. He might be hurt if I declined his escort and gave no reason."

"Husband or no husband, he is a young man, and he is not married yet, and I never count upon a wedding till I see *folks* going to church, for I have known some queer things

in my time. Why, there was your second cousin, mother, Jessie Platt, engaged for four or five years to that young Everest, and the ring bought and the wedding clothes made, and he went and married a girl from Canada he had only set eyes on three weeks before. So don't couple Miss Guise and Mr. Oswald too surely ; besides, he is a young man, and though he may be the best one going, yet people may talk if they see you and him together, as he proposed last night. It is such a world for talk."

"That is the worst of the country," said Esther ; "you may do as you like in London ; people are too busy there to concern themselves about other people's business. But what could I say to Mr. Oswald, Mr. King ?"

"Nothing at all ; only tell him that I am going Guise way, and will drive you myself. If he says aught to me when you are not nigh, I shall say—'Mr. Oswald, it will look better that a staid old married man like me, and in the place of her father, as one might say, should be seen with the girl than you, a fine young fellow of another standing in society ;' and he'll understand."

"But what will he think ?" pleaded Esther. All unconsciously she had rather set her heart upon this drive to Guise Court in the pony-carriage, and neither the jolting "trap," nor the grey mare's heavy jog-trot, nor yet the farmer's companionship, seemed to compensate for the disappointment. Esther was only a girl, you must remember, a young and inexperienced girl too ; and people of seventeen, though they may, through early and severe discipline, come to years of discretion somewhat sooner than those who have had no hard discipline at all, are yet far from being universally wise and prudent, and they sometimes cherish inexpedient wishes and want to have and to show a will of their own—the very best and steadiest of them. It would be strangely unnatural if they did not, for youth is youth, even if it had been duly trained in all kinds of prudence and self-repression ; and just at this moment Esther wished very much to have her own way, and go with Mr. Oswald. Surely, if Miss Cecil did not object, she need not have any scruples.

"Never mind what he thinks," said the farmer oracularly—

"men think many things that women don't and needn't to. Leave it to me, Esther."

Esther felt she could not contend any longer, but she rose from the table in no very good temper, and there was a cloud upon her brow as she went up to her room to finish her preparations before setting off for school. It was a heavy, sultry morning too, cloudy, and raining at intervals, and not at all calculated to raise the spirits. As she passed through the kitchen Mrs. King said to her—

"The farmer is right, Esther, my dear. People that don't know the circumstances might think it strange, seeing you and Mr. Oswald flying across country in an open carriage, only your two selves. There's nothing like being on the safe side. My mother used to say to me, 'Polly, I am not afraid of thee getting into mischief, but thee hast such an independent spirit I am a little afraid of thee *seeming* to get into mischief. And though the seeming is not as bad as the reality, very often there comes of it quite as much disaster.' And my mother was a wise woman, Esther. Moreover, the Bible says, 'Abstain from all *appearance* of evil.'"

"But I cannot see that there could be either evil or appearance of evil in my going with Mr. Oswald," persisted Esther, determined to battle to the last.

"No, child, there is no evil in the thing itself. Mr. Oswald is a good young man, though an unstable one, and if need were—*real* need—I would feel quite comfortable if he were going to take you to New York. But there is no need at all in the case. My husband can take you without going much out of his way, for he is obliged to see the miller at Underleigh, a mile beyond Guise Court, and nobody will have occasion to talk. If you were of Mr. Oswald's own class it would not so much matter; but a girl in your station of life always does herself harm if she becomes intimate with a gentleman, or even if she appears to be intimate with him. People are almost always sure to hint, by-and-by, that *perhaps* she is too intimate. They wouldn't say a word; oh, no! not they. But it does not *look* well, and they would not let a *daughter of theirs*, etc., etc., and all that sort of thing, my dear. And as the harm is done, the snowball is set rolling,

and the further it goes the bigger it gets, and the dirtier it gets. Yes ! I know such scandal is abominable ; but it is the way of the world, and it cannot be helped. You cannot change it ; and a young woman who tries to defy the world, be she as pure as a white lily, is worse than mad. Sooner or later she is sure to come to grief. And I tell you what, Esther, if you were my own daughter I should say positively, ‘ You go with father, or not at all.’ I don’t pretend to have any authority over you, my dear. I have no right, so long as you behave yourself under my roof, to say you shall do this, or you shall not do that ; but I hope you will let me advise you just as if I were your mother. Don’t be vexed with me, dear ! Neither the farmer nor me means any disrespect to you or Mr. Oswald. We think you are a very good, steady girl, with the sense of twice your age, and we have not a word to say against Mr. Uffadyne ; but we do think that it would be more seemly if you went quietly in our own trap to Guise.”

And Mrs. King, who knew when to leave off talking, even when the talking was a duty, went away into the back kitchen and called Patience, while Esther, looking at the clock, found, to her dismay, that she must hurry or be late.

She walked as quickly as the hot, close air of the morning would let her ; and all the way she was chafing at what Mrs. King had said about her station. She knew quite well that her rank in life was not that of the Uffadynes and the Guises, but she did not like to be reminded of the fact ; neither could she consider herself exactly of the same standing as farmer King himself. And then she remembered Dick’s words that the Kendalls had good blood in their veins, though they were poor, and she began to wonder about herself, whether there were any relations of her father still living, and where they would be likely to be found, and what really was the social standing of the Kendalls. She felt very thankful, to be sure, that the Hellicars were neither kith nor kin of hers ; only the unlucky Dick was really her relation. He was the son of her aunt Jane, of whom she recollected hearing her father speak with unfeigned pity, as having been *betrayed into a very foolish and unhappy marriage.* Mr.

Hellicar was but her uncle-in-law, if indeed the second alliance, with Myra Clarkson, did not put an end to the relationship ; as for the rest, they could be barely called "connections."

Then Esther tried to recall her father's face and manner, but her memory failed her, especially as to his looks ; though Mr. Hellicar had said more than once that "she featured her father," and was "out and out a Kendall !" She had a dim recollection of a grave-looking, tall man, very dark, and of dignified deportment, not at all demonstrative, so far as she could remember, but always kind to her and gentle, though not having very much to say to her. Indeed he was not often at home after her mother's death, except late at night and very early in the morning, when Esther was in bed. A person who was half servant, half housekeeper, had taken care of her, and her home was somewhere in the direction of Homerton.

That was all she could recall, and it was indistinct and shadowy in the extreme. There was only one point on which she was positive—that her father was a totally different type of man from Mr. Hellicar, and that there had been a certain air of respectability about her childish home which was altogether absent from the wretched household of the Hellicars.

Esther's reverie came to an abrupt conclusion, for just then she reached the school-house, and some of her pupils were waiting for her in the porch. The usual examination had taken place several days before, but the girls had not yet been informed of the result, though there were many shrewd guesses as to who would stand first and carry away the chief prizes. Anne Culverwell and Mary Murrell were pretty sure of prizes and first-class certificates of merit ; Sarah Lee was certainly next to them ; and Belinda Smith was trembling with hope and fear. She was quite a different creature now, and would willingly have rendered even a blind obedience to her young governess, but many a black mark had been registered against her in the early months of the year, and it was the general opinion that her reformation came too late to *be of much use* for that term, so far as rewards and certificates *were in question*.

Of course it was a day of excitement ; the room was prettily decorated with green boughs and plenty of flowers, and the girls were all dressed in their best, as was the custom on prize-day ; and the rector, as well as Miss Uffadyne, was expected, while such of the parents as chose to be present were made welcome.

The elder girls gathered round Esther as she entered, and for some minutes the schoolroom was a regular Babel. It was Miss Kendall here, and Miss Kendall there, and Miss Kendall everywhere. Then the classes were formed, and Esther read the usual prayers, after which she unlocked an inner room in which the prizes were stowed away, and she and the two monitors arranged them to the best advantage on the centre table.

At eleven o'clock the rector arrived, hot, panting, and pompous. He was very stout and good-tempered, but he would have made a better gentleman-farmer than a parson ; and he certainly thought more of foxes than of some of his parishioners. His love for foxes was marvellous, and woe to any one in Chilcombe who was suspected of having trapped one. No punishment could be too great for him. His disgrace was indelible, and favour could he never expect again from his "spiritual pastor and master," though haply the other county magnates might overlook his enormity, and though he humbled himself even down to the very depths of penitence. Oswald always said that Mr. Beaufort believed in an eleventh commandment—to wit, "Thou shalt not kill foxes except in orthodox fashion ;" and, from his preaching and teaching, there might have been a twelfth—"Thou shalt not poach !" Poaching, on his showing, was a sin from which the culprit could scarcely ever expect to be absolved, either in this world or the next ! He was a widower, with one little girl—a nervous, shrinking, timid child, who probably shared his affections with the foxes ; and this morning she came, attended by Miss Morrison, her governess, to "assist" at the distribution of the prizes.

Cecil came last, Miss Smith following in her wake, and looking daggers at Esther, who was still unforgiven for all *sorts of imaginary offences*. Cecil seemed fagged and worn.

She was quite unlike her usual bright, energetic self, and though she nodded kindly to Esther, she did not attempt to enter into any kind of conversation, but straightway addressed herself to business.

Then the school report was read, and the names of the successful candidates for prizes proclaimed. Mary Murrell came first, as everybody hoped and expected ; then Anne Culverwell ; then Sarah Lee ; and a prize for general improvement in lessons and behaviour was adjudged to Belinda Smith, to her infinite satisfaction and delight, for she had never before carried home so much as a certificate, and it was the general belief of her own family that she was incorrigibly naughty, and could never be expected to reform. Her father said she was a "cute lass ; but as perverse a one as ever stepped." Her mother always pronounced her "a limb"—I am very much afraid she meant a limb of Satan ; and the neighbours generally were the very reverse of laudatory whenever her name was mentioned. It seemed to her like the beginning of a new and happy era when she clasped the prize-book in her arms, for now people would believe she was in earnest, and really meant to be good. Hitherto her professions had been met with jeers and scorn, and her progress had been very up-hill work indeed, and attended with many a stumble.

Esther had looked forward to this morning with some impatience. She had anticipated the girls' pleasure, and Miss Cecil's commendations, and the rector's congratulations quite eagerly ; and now the whole affair seemed flat, tedious, and uninteresting. She longed for the scene to come to an end ; she was tired of the rector's prosy common-places, which made the ceremony of distribution twice as long as it need have been ; and even the bright faces of her pupils grew wearisome as they sat opposite to her, row after row, beaming with the satisfaction inspired by success, and the prospect of the holidays. At length it was over ; the last prize was given ; the last speech was wound up with an appropriate peroration ; prayers were read by the rector ; and, after a short *pause*, the Babel of tongues recommenced, the school was formally dismissed, and Esther was free to speak to Miss Uffadyne.

"You are going to Guise Court, of course?" was the first question. Then, without waiting for the reply, which she took for granted, she continued: "It is nearly one o'clock now, you had better come round home with me and have some luncheon. The carriage is ordered for half-past two."

"But I have not said good-bye to Mrs. King."

"You can do that on the road, and take up your baggage at the same time. Here, little Tibbs, go to Mrs. King's and give her my compliments, and say I have taken Miss Kendall home with me, and she will call as she goes to Guise Court." Then, turning to Esther: "It is only taking the sweep of the Slade; it will not make five minutes' difference in time."

"But, Miss Cecil, am I to go—are you going too?" said Esther, stammering and turning very red. She knew she was acting injudiciously.

"What is the matter, child? You are like a peony. No; I am not going. I have been at Guise Court so much lately, and really I am not of any use. I was scarcely admitted to my uncle's room, and as for being any comfort to Florence it is out of the question. She and I seem farther and farther apart every time we meet. If she wants me of course I will go; but unless she actually sends for me, I shall remain at Chilcombe—at least till there is a change. It is my opinion, Esther, that my uncle may rally yet. Florence was never of a sanguine temperament. At any rate, I quite expect that he will last through the summer. Well, what is it? do you want me to go?"

Then Esther took courage, and replied, boldly: "The farmer and Mrs. King do not approve of my driving with Mr. Uffadyne, and the farmer wishes to take me himself in his trap."

Now, in any other case Cecil would have been the first to perceive and acknowledge the wisdom of the Kings' objection. Naturally she was a great stickler for propriety; but this was partly her own arrangement, and Cecil, like most people who pride themselves on their superior prudence and judgment, could not bear that any of her arrangements should be set aside, or her plans traversed. It did flash through her *mind as Esther spoke*, that the proposed drive was not the

most correct thing in the world ; but then it had been agreed upon, and it was a special occasion, and if one cared for all the nonsense that foolish people talked, one would never be able to stir at all. Besides, it was impertinent of the Kings—Esther was her *protégée*, and she must not be interfered with.

“I am extremely obliged to Mr. and Mrs. King,” said Cecil, haughtily, “but really I think they forget themselves when they take upon them to amend my plans. You are under my protection here. I am answerable, not they, for your general behaviour as regards society. I did not think Mrs. King would be so impertinent.”

“Oh, it is not that!” replied Esther, conscience-stricken at this imputation cast on her kind, motherly Mrs. King, whom in reality she loved next to Florence, and far before Miss Uffadyne. “The Kings thought—I thought, it was Mr. Oswald’s plan.”

“And is not Mr. Oswald to be trusted? Notwithstanding his *limpness* of character in some particulars, his principles are unassailable. It does not mend matters that these farmer-people distrust my brother.”

“They do not, indeed! Mr. King said the thing was all right in itself, but not expedient, because of *appearances*.”

“Appearances, indeed! What next, I wonder? A farmer and his wife setting themselves up to legislate for their superiors, settling *les convenances* as if they knew what was practised in society! I shall turn strict Conservative, Esther; the arrogance of the middle classes is growing unendurable.”

Esther felt the extreme injustice of the charge in the present instance, for never could there be people more simple and unassuming than the farmer and his wife; neither of them would have dreamed of questioning any decision of the Uffadynes had not her own interest been concerned, and they had come to look upon her as a daughter, their very love and goodness giving them the rights of parents. Esther felt that she was untrue to these best of friends, but Cecil’s vehemence and her own self-will were carrying her away *completely*. There are moments when we are wilfully blind, *when we shut our eyes and stop our ears, and deliberately*

go the way of inclination, all unheeding the remonstrances of our better selves. Oh, how often, in such cases, we take paths that can never be retraced! One little opening is left unguarded, and lo! the enemy cometh in like a flood.

Esther made one more effort. "They legislate only for me," she said in a deprecatory tone. "They would not presume if it were a person of Mr. Oswald's own order. I am one of themselves."

"Indeed you are not. They are very respectable people, but if you had been just what they are, and no more, I should never have kept you here at Chilcombe; I should never have made you my friend, my companion. Come, we have discussed the affair quite long enough. Let us go home. That Tibbs' child must have delivered her message a quarter of an hour ago."

"Then I am to go with Mr. Oswald?"

"Of course you are. I will arrange all that. Do not trouble yourself; you shall not be blamed."

They walked home quickly, and found ready the luncheon, which was to be Esther's dinner. It was pleasant to be once more in the atmosphere of refinement; the polished silver, the sparkling crystal, the prettily garnished dishes, the gracefully arranged flowers in their vase of Bohemian glass, were all actual pleasures to Esther; they seemed quite natural, these pleasant surroundings, and they helped to make her more contented with herself, and to silence the self-upbraidings which the silent monitor within continued making. Then Oswald came in, and he greeted her with all the respect and deference due to one in his own rank, and again Esther was pleased. It struck her afterwards that they were all in unnaturally good spirits; she herself was going to the house of mourning, and her best friend was in extremity of sorrow; she *ought* to be feeling very sad indeed, and as for Oswald, surely the bitter grief and anguish of his betrothed should have been his also. Their gay tone and their converse, which, though not frivolous, was of a light nature, seemed sadly incongruous when afterwards she reverted to it.

When luncheon was over Cecil said, "Oswald, Esther has to go back to the Slade for her travelling-bag, and to wish

Mrs. King good-bye. I brought her away unexpectedly from the school-house. I will drive her there, and you had better join us at the gate. It is not ten minutes' walk across that meadow where the hay is down."

"But why should you drive her to the Slade? Once in the carriage, it does not matter taking a slight *détour*. You need not trouble yourself."

"I choose to trouble myself. I wish to speak to Mrs. King."

"Oh, if you *choose*, I know it is all settled as irrevocably as if it had been decreed by the Medes and Persians. But why should I walk to the Slade? The carriage holds four."

"I choose also that you should join us at the farm. I told you I wanted to speak to Mrs. King. You would be in the way."

"Very well, anything for a quiet life. But I tell you what, Cis, if you were coupled with a fellow who liked his own way half as well as you liked yours, it would be one incessant skirmish and struggle from morning till night. *Au revoir*, Miss Kendall; we shall meet, not at Philippi, but at Mrs. King's garden gate."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE OLD BARN.

It was an immense relief to Mrs. King's mind when from the porch, where she was training her roses and clematis, she saw Esther and Cecil drive up together.

"All right," she said to her husband, who was taking his forty after-dinner winks. "Miss Cecil is come instead of Mr. Oswald; that is as it should be. So you need not trouble yourself, William."

"And very glad I am, for it is of no use seeing the miller till I have heard from Garnett, of Stannington, and there's rain coming on, and I want to see to the Brook piece being carried this afternoon. There is Miss Cecil coming up the walk; go you and meet her, wife."

Esther's bag was standing ready in the porch, and Patience was despatched to the carriage with it. Miss Uffadyne looked as portentous as the clouds, and Mrs. King knew that she was displeased. Cecil was not come to argue the matter with the farmer's wife ; she was there merely to declare her intentions.

" Oh, Miss Uffadyne, I am so glad you are going to Guise," said the good woman ; " the farmer did not have the letter he expected, so he has no call to go to Underleigh Mill, and he wants to get some of his hay carried to-night ; there's thunder in the air, and the glasses are going down. I hope you'll not be overtaken with the storm, Miss Uffadyne ; it looks very black over Helmsley wood, but you are going towards the coast."

" I am not going, Mrs. King. I am returning home at once. My brother will drive Esther to Guise Court ; I believe he said as much last night. Mr. King need not have troubled himself."

" But—" Mrs. King was beginning. Cecil replied in that tone which all the Chilcombe people knew how to interpret as signifying displeasure and a settled determination to act as she chose. " Esther informed me of your scruples, Mrs. King, and she is much obliged to you ; but I prefer the plan first agreed upon. It is by my desire that she accepts Mr. Uffadyne's escort. I see him coming beyond the stile yonder ; shall Esther get out and say good-bye ?"

" No, I will go to her." And Mrs. King went down the walk, and warmly pressed Esther's hand ; but she looked very grave. She wasted no more words, for she was not one of those foolish women who think it incumbent on them to go on delivering their testimony as long as any one will listen to them. She knew that her counsel was in vain, and she concluded to be silent now ; but there was a sadness in her face that Esther had seldom if ever seen there before, and she wished she had thrown her own weight into the scale, or, better still, have said nothing about the journey to Cecil, leaving it to Mrs. King to settle for her. But it was too late now, for there was Mr. Oswald, and the ponies were impatient to be off. He sprang in, and Cecil turned back to

the village. As they dashed into the lane which led into the Guiseley road, Esther looked round and saw Mrs. King still standing at the gate. She kissed her hand, and the salutation was returned. The next minute the trees hid her from sight, and Oswald began to talk to her in his usual pleasant strain. The strange appearance of the clouds attracted their attention, and then Oswald began describing some electrical phenomena he had witnessed in Calabria; thence it was easy to pass to Italy itself, to Rome, to the Campagna, to the classic wars of the Peninsula, to the shadowy Etruscans, and to the cycles of barbarism and civilisation which swept alternately over the nations in the earlier ages of the world.

"I read a little about the Etruscans the other day," said Esther; "but I could find nothing satisfactory respecting their history, nor could Miss Uffadyne tell me where to look for the information I needed."

"I can find you a book in my uncle's library that will tell you as much about them as you will care to know. Little is really known concerning this singular and ancient people; their sepulchres chiefly attest the magnificence of their lives; and so remote is their history that one cannot find among the tribes and peoples of the Italian peninsula the faintest thread of tradition as to their existence. Yet that they were highly civilised, luxurious, refined, and lovers of art, cannot be doubted even."

"They were anterior to the Romans?"

"Certainly. The Rome of the early kings and of the first republic was the foe and not the friend of civilisation—the destroyer, not the promoter of art. She proved this in plundering the tombs of the Etruscans, and in destroying every trace of their sway. She could only do so partially, for still deep down beneath the soil of centuries the traveller of to-day finds those countless sepulchres to witness to the existence and grandeur of a people who lived and died in ages whose history reaches us only in shadowy records of fable and tradition. Did it ever strike you how in the earlier *ages of the world* barbarism and civilisation succeeded each *other in cycles*, and in pretty regular succession?"

“No ; I did not know that it was so. You mean that the barbarism of the Romans came in like a flood, and swept away the refinements and luxuries of these remote people, and then that as century after century passed they became luxurious lovers of art and literature till the cycles of civilisation came round again in the same region.”

“Yes ; and this cycle was succeeded by another of barbarism. There came a time when Rome sank under her weight of empire, when her luxury became vicious extravagance, and her refinement voluptuous fastidiousness ; and then came the Goths and Vandals, the children of the frozen North, and they overran and wasted the fair towns and cities of the empire, till all was ruin, desolation, and barbarism once more. Then, again, as centuries rolled away, these savage nations grew in their turn to be polished and intelligent ; they, too, learned the pleasures of luxury, and cultivated the fine arts, and so a third cycle of civilisation may be said to have set in, extending even to this present day.”

“There cannot be another cycle of barbarism ?”

“It would seem not ; because the nations, east and west, north and south, are now civilised, and it would be difficult to say whence the barbarian tide would flow. But I shall tire you with this disquisition on one of my favourite themes.”

“Oh, no, indeed ! If you knew how I enjoy all this kind of thing ! If I were a man I would travel ; I seem to have learned so much already from exchanging town life for country life, and yet the much is so very little.”

“And when your much is more, and your more beyond the most of your sex, it will still seem the merest trifle compared with the vast and unexplored oceans of knowledge of which the most erudite, the most gifted, catch only shadowy glimpses.”

“Is it not wearying to feel always so far behind ?—to know that there is so much to which one *never* can attain ?”

“Sometimes it is so. You must have experienced it already, I *should think*. Every one who truly loves knowledge, and pursues it in real earnest, feels every now and

then sickened and disheartened. One has toiled and panted, and toiled again, and when one looks back one is still only at the mountain's base. Alp upon Alp remains to be surmounted ; and when, at the close of a long life, one perhaps reaches the highest visible pinnacle, lo ! there is still another and another chain of hills, reaching up beyond the clouds. And in this life the yearning for the Infinite is never realised. But, Miss Kendall, we are going to have a storm—I hear the thunder, and the sea yonder is blackness itself. Ah ! did you catch that flash upon the waves ? ”

“ Yes. It lightened across the Channel while you were talking about the Etruscans. I am not afraid of the tempest, unless it be very violent ; but how will the ponies like it ? ”

“ That is what I am not quite certain about. At present it will not matter ; but, drive hard as we will, I am afraid we shall never reach the Court before the storm is upon us. It will be a heavy one—it has been gathering all day.”

“ Mr. King thought it would keep off till sunset.”

“ So did I till about ten minutes ago. What shall we do —we have passed the last place of shelter ? Shall we turn back, and wait at the Quarry Cottages ? The first loud peal will bring down a torrent of rain.”

“ Just as you please. You are sure we cannot reach Guise Court ? ”

“ It is all up-hill, you see, from this point to the lodge gates, and after we turn the corner yonder we shall face the tempest. I should not mind if I were sure of the ponies ; but I do not want to frighten you a second time, Miss Kendall. Still, it would take us nearly as long to go back to the Quarry. Shall we push on ? ”

“ It will be the best way. We might have time, and we shall be prepared in case the tempest overtake us. Oh ! Mr. Oswald, is not the sea grand ? ”

“ It is indeed ! And that awful voice speaking out of the darkness, and calling along the waves, how glorious ! And did you ever see such a light ?—so pale, so lurid, and yet *so clear !* Look at those hill-tops, looming up like giants, *black and grim ;* and those ruins yonder—how spectral they

show against that leaden mass of slowly sinking cloud. And if we dared to stop—which we dare not—we should hear the roar of the tide. Ha! the rain is beginning.”

Esther folded her cloak round her, and put up her umbrella. All Oswald's attention was given to his fiery little steeds, which were already laying down their ears very suspiciously, as if ready to bolt at the first thing that scared them; and every peal of thunder sounded nearer and nearer, and the lightning showed more vividly. At first only a few drops of rain fell, large and slow; but very soon they came more thickly, and pattered on the firs and beeches that lined each side of the road. One peal louder than the rest, and the ponies began to plunge, and the rain to pour! And then Oswald regretted he had not turned back to the Quarry Cottages. Just as he became really apprehensive they came up with some one standing under a large, spreading pine—a tall, loosely-made man, with streaming hair, and pale, thin face, and clad in habiliments as shabby as untidy. The sort of man, you would have said, who only wore clothes because he needed covering, only ate because he must have food to live, and only slept because he could not help it. At that moment the heavens seemed to open, the whole landscape was wrapped in white, dazzling light, that scarcely heralded the tremendous crash that sounded as if it must mingle earth and skies in one wild mass of ruin. They felt the heat of the fierce electric flame upon their faces, and it *hissed* as it passed them by with its awful, scorching breath, as it hisses only when it is truly the fiery, deathful levin itself, and not merely the more harmless flash.

The ponies, terrified and maddened, would have torn away to the open side of the hill, which sloped over broken rocky ground to some low, marshy lands, irrigated by the tide. Oswald would have been powerless to hold them in had not the man under the fir-tree sprung to his assistance, and standing at the heads of the frightened creatures, by main force compelled them to submit. Then, after some soothing and caressing, the ponies consented to stand tolerably still.

“Why, Digby, who would have thought of seeing you *here*?” said Oswald, holding out his hand. “A thousand

thanks ! those animals were just getting the mastery ; they are fed up too much, and are not sufficiently worked. Is it safe sheltering under those trees, think you ? ”

“ No ! I am sure it is not. I was just thinking of retreating to the old barn when you came up. I wanted to watch the sea.”

“ What old barn ? ”

“ You, the heir of Guise, and not know the old barn ! It is scarcely to be called a building. It is an outlying piece of the ruins hard by, and somebody patched it up years ago, and used it as barn, cart-hovel, bed-room, parlour, and hall. That queer fellow it was who haunted these parts, and never spoke to any one. He was found dead on Shalham Moor, and it is believed that he had a pot of money hidden in the barn where he lived, and that he haunts it still at intervals. It will shelter us now, ponies and all.”

Oswald helped Esther to alight, and the person who was called Digby led the way down a green opening between the trees to the hilly piece, where the ruins of an ancient fortified house still existed. At the foot of the mound on which the ruins stood were some decayed out-buildings, and among them the old barn, as it was called, the only part of the whole that boasted of anything that could be named a roof. One end, however, was waterproof, and thither the whole party retreated, the carriage and the ponies being likewise accommodated.

“ Really, Lance,” said Oswald, when they were not uncomfortably seated upon a perfectly dry stone-settle, “ we are under no end of obligations to you. It is no great hardship to stay here awhile ; and what a magnificent view from that loophole. Ah ! I am really very remiss ; probably Miss Kendall and you are strangers. Miss Kendall, may I introduce Mr. Lancelot Digby, of Helmsley Grange ? ”

So this was the “ mighty scholar,” who went about, according to farmer King, “ like one demented.” The man whose chief and beloved occupation was “ no yield.” Esther and Oswald sat almost in the shadow ; but a broad streak of *pallid light* coming in through the loophole near at hand, *fell full* upon the face and figure of Mr. Lancelot ; and a

very singular face it was, handsome and proud, but sunken and full of sad thought. Beautiful eyes shone out from large white lids—"ray-fringed eyelids of the morn"—and from beneath shaggy, over-hanging brows, and a most capacious forehead; but the expression was melancholy and even bitter. The features were refined though sharp, the nose peculiarly straight and well shapen; but the mouth and chin were hidden from view by a ragged moustache, and an immense untrimmed beard, which, however, was of the very finest texture, evincing a delicate and refined nature, and a sensitive disposition. Esther quite comprehended how to one of Mr. King's stamp he would seem indeed "forlorn-looking." But in her eyes he was every inch a poet; and she doubted not that pale, broad, pensive brow would be one day crowned by bays immortal. She knew by instinct that people do not have so wonderful a phrenological conformation for nothing. To a girl of Esther's temperament, a poet is as a thing divine—a marvellous something, pure and ethereal, scarcely touched by taint of earth and time, inheriting by birthright his Olympian privileges, and ready always to plume his wings, and soar away to a more congenial and radiant atmosphere. Spite of his very shabby clothes, his unkempt *chevelure*, his white, worn face, and his rounded shoulders, Esther looked on him with reverence. To her he sat there as "the heir of all the ages," as an uncrowned king, whose day of triumph was to come.

Presently he turned his deep, sad gaze from the wrathful, darkening sea to her face. Perhaps he saw something there that brightened his own, for it was lit up by a smile of such wondrous beauty that even Oswald started. The whole countenance was transfigured, the whole man was changed, and power and sweetness shone in every trait where only weariness and sombre gloom had showed before. "Do you not know my sister Edith?" he asked of Esther.

"I made her acquaintance only last evening," she replied, colouring beneath the intensity of his look; and colour wrought a strange change in Esther's face; with her dark wreathing hair and glorious eyes, the rose flush made her *positively beautiful*—beautiful, too, with the only beauty

that Lancelot worshipped—the beauty of soul and intellect.

“*Only* last night?” he continued. “I have not been home for a week, yet I am sure I have heard her speak of you.”

“She may have seen me at church. We have no evening service at Chilcombe, and since the weather has been so fine I have gone once or twice to Helmsley. I like the green gloom of the old church, and that deep porch, and the solemn arched windows and chancel; and the walk there through the wood is charming. But I never spoke to Miss Digby till last night, when I went with a note from Mr. King to Mr. Digby.”

“I think I must have seen you at church. Your face is not strange to me; perhaps it is one of the dream-faces I see sometimes. Philosophers tell us that there is nothing absolutely ideal.”

“I have been in all three times to Helmsley church—once on Good Friday and twice since on the Sunday evening.”

“And you always take the wood-path?”

“I did on Good Friday, and I went by the wood last night. It is nearer, as well as so much more beautiful. But the other times I went by the road; once there had been a shower in the afternoon, and once I had some one with me who preferred the road.”

“You say you have not been home for a week. Where have you been, Lancelot?” asked Oswald.

“Did you not know? I have a lodging on Templemoor yonder. It is not of the sort you would fancy, but it suits me. I can write there in peace.”

“I should have thought you could write in peace at the Grange; it is large enough, and altogether instinct with the spirit of romance.”

“And instinct with several other spirits, the relentless enemies of romance. Also, large as it is, the children find *their* way into every hole and corner of it. That long *echoing* gallery, Oswald, where you and I and Rupert used to play at tournaments, is their favourite haunt. In our

time no one ever came near it, and the key was supposed to be lost, only we knew where it was. The deserted wing is open now, and the children run up and down, and shout and scream, and quarrel and cry—even the ghosts must have flitted in despair. How I do hate a houseful of badly-managed children! I like this part near the sea, it suits me better than our own valleys and green meads. Once I was belated on Templemoor, and finding a very humble sort of cottage in one of those queer ravines with which it abounds, I begged a night's lodging. The people, a shepherd and his wife, gave me a bed—not a very luxurious one, you may imagine, but the room was large, though meanly furnished, and commanding such a view! They were simple folk, and I liked them, and they liked me, and it was agreed that I should take up my quarters there whenever I was late on Templemoor; and at last it came to pass that we made a compact respecting this room: it was to be kept entirely for me; I was to pay a fixed sum, weekly or monthly, and to go and come at my own pleasure."

"How long ago was that?"

"About a year ago—ever since last summer. I am really at work now, Oswald."

"Upon the *Epic*?"

"Yes! I am giving all my strength to that."

"I should like to see some of it. I would ask you to come to the Court, only there is trouble there just now. My uncle is very ill."

"Is Mr. Guise worse than usual?"

"Very much; the doctors believe he is going. Cecil thinks he will rally. I do not, though it is not improbable that he may last longer than Miss Guise expects. I am going back to the Court now, as you may have guessed, and I am taking Miss Kendall, at Miss Guise's particular request. I think the rain is nearly over?"

"Yes! the storm expended itself, I fancy, in that one grand burst; it is going away up channel. I am not sure but we shall have it in style a few hours later, but for the present it is over."

"We had better set off at once; it scarcely rains at all."

Shall we go, Miss Kendall? And I say, Lance, I shall certainly come and beat you up in your bachelor's quarters."

"You will find the poverty, if not the genius, that is commonly supposed to be associated with the poet's lot; and I can offer you barley-bread and buttermilk! and I think my hostess has some spruce-beer, but I have not tasted it."

"You are a total-abstainer still?"

"Still! But pray understand, I do not abstain on orthodox abstinence principles. I drink only water because it costs nothing, and all other beverages cost money, of which I have always small store. When my Epic is paid for and everybody is reading it, I will quaff, moderately, of course, Rhenish and French wines! Till then, *aqua pura*, and plenty of it."

"The Digbys seem to be very poor," said Esther, as they were driving on.

"Yes!" replied Oswald; "poor as church mice, and I am afraid they are going to be poorer still."

CHAPTER XXXII.

LADY TORRISDALE.

IN an earlier chapter was mentioned Lady Torrisdale, the aunt of Florence Guise, and the sister-in-law of Mr. Guise; and now it is necessary more fully to introduce her to all those who may be interested in this story of "Grey and Gold."

Her ladyship was the sister of Mrs. Guise. She had married for money, and had been disappointed, the Torrisdale estates being almost entirely in the hands of his lordship's creditors. John, Lord Torrisdale, had once been rich, but the turf and billiards had been his ruin. He had also lived a life of great profligacy; and the costly *and unlawful* pleasures he had pursued would have quickly *drained any exchequer*, had he not likewise been addicted to *the excitement* of gambling. At length, in his fiftieth year,

it was proposed to him that he should mend his shattered fortunes by marrying an heiress, if an heiress could be found fair enough and sufficiently well born to present to the world as Lady Torrisdale, and wealthy enough to flavour the bitter cup of matrimony, which his necessities required him at least to taste.

Two sisters, the supposed co-heiresses of a very rich old uncle, were introduced to him. The eldest, Augusta, was held to be the favourite, and she was handsome enough to be generally admired. Lord Torrisdale would have preferred the younger Miss Lascelles ; for her personal loveliness was something remarkable, and her temper was proverbially gentle, while at the same time the admirable qualities of her mind were apparent to all who were so fortunate as to be of her circle. Augusta, on the contrary, was haughty, cross-grained, and, as some people averred, of "a most unbearable temper." As it occasionally happens, it would have seemed that Nature had delighted in producing, as the children of the same parents, the most complete contrarieties. Even in person there was no resemblance between the sisters. Augusta was dark-skinned, raven-haired, dark-eyed, tall, and stately ; Laura was delicately fair, blue-eyed, and golden-tressed, of fairy-like proportions, and simple and graceful in her manner. Augusta was proud, ambitious, and selfish ; Laura was of a meek and quiet spirit, patient, forgiving, with strong and deep affections. Lord Torrisdale proposed to Laura, but met with no success ; and finding that to persevere in his suit would only be to court fresh denials and disappointments, he transferred his attentions to the elder sister.

As self-willed a young lady as ever lived was Miss Lascelles ; and having heard of the extent of the Torrisdale estates, and having no objection to become a countess, she resolved to become Lady Torrisdale, in spite of all the warnings she received. In vain did her friends refer to his terribly involved fortunes ; in vain were stories, scarcely fit to be breathed in feminine ears, whisperingly confided to her by shocked *matrons* ; in vain was she cautioned against *trusting herself* to so evil-minded, so dishonourable, so

thoroughly unprincipled a man ; she had taken her resolution, and she was not to be deterred from carrying her cherished plans into execution.

Lord Torrisdale assured himself that Augusta Lascelles' fortune was in part, a least, inalienable—that is to say, it was in her own hands, and she could not be deprived of it, even if she married in defiance of every friend and relative she had. The uncle, too, was an old man, very infirm, and not likely to alter his will, however angry he might be for a little while with his disobedient niece. He was the last man in the world to be implacable ; and though he forbade Lord Torrisdale to visit or to correspond with Augusta, he never threatened to disinherit her in case his commands were disobeyed. There were many reasons why a private marriage suited Lord Torrisdale, and he easily persuaded Augusta to elope from the house of a friend at Brighton ; and it was not till she had been some hours his wife that her flight was suspected.

Of course there were no settlements, which was exactly what the elderly bridegroom desired ; but he was not quite so well satisfied when he found that old General Lascelles did resent his niece's undutiful conduct, and did not receive with all eagerness, as had been anticipated, the overtures of a speedy reconciliation. A perfect programme had been arranged, and neither my lord nor my lady doubted but that it would be carried to a triumphant issue ; but like many other programmes of the same sort, it was found to be impossible. There was failure at the very outset ; and soon it was discovered that the performance could not take place at all. The general would not relent ; he would not even see the offending couple. The countess of Torrisdale would never be allowed to fill the place of Augusta Lascelles.

A very few years passed away and Lord Torrisdale was a beggar ; his resources came to an end at last ; his clever shifts were exhausted ; every trick that an aristocratic rogue can play he had played once too often, and his summer-day *friends had flown*. Also, the fortune his wife had brought *him was gone*, except a miserable pittance which he could not *touch*. General Lascelles was dead, and Laura was married

to Mr. Guise. Disappointed, miserable, outraged as a wife, without money and in failing health, Lady Torrisdale hated, with a bitter, vindictive fury, the man who had brought her to such straits. She scarcely remembered that she was equally the author of her misfortunes ; she had only her self-will and her wretched weak ambition to thank for the humiliating position in which she found herself. Of all that she had striven to secure by her loveless, imprudent marriage, her coronet alone remained. She was Lady Torrisdale, indeed, but she had neither lands, nor mansions, nor equipages, nor servants, nor jewels, nor any of the common appendages of rank. She had not even a husband, for Lord Torrisdale fled the country, taking with him all that he could lay his hands upon, and also a person whose presence had frequently insulted his wife, and who called herself Lady Torrisdale in the distant land where the wretched pair took up their dwelling. So the real Lady Torrisdale was left alone, in sickness and poverty, and in a foreign land. She never again saw her worthless lord ; he died before he completed his sixtieth year, and the entailed estates, with all their incumbrances, went to a distant relative, who declined having any communications with the late peer's widow.

Then Lady Torrisdale bethought herself of her sister, from whom she had held aloof ever since her marriage ; she was in Paris when news of the earl's death reached her, and being reduced to nearly the last extremities, she resolved to sink her pride and return to England, throwing herself on the generosity of the Guises. Laura and her husband received the poor wanderer with open arms ; the long estrangement was forgotten, gratuitous insults were forgiven. Mrs. Guise saw only the sister of her youth in the forlorn, deserted, haggard-looking woman who presented herself a suppliant for her bounty, and she rejoiced in the opportunity thus afforded of renewing, as closely as possible, the long-loosened tie of consanguinity. Lady Torrisdale found herself indeed at home, and yet a most honoured guest, and for a little while she was softened and almost happy ; but soon the restlessness, the narrowness, the heartlessness of her *nature betrayed itself*. She could never forgive Laura for her

superior advantages, for the happier fate which had been hers, forgetting that in great measure Laura had chosen her fate very much as she had chosen hers. Laura's innocent happiness was a continual reminder of her own terrible matrimonial experiences; she was perpetually tormenting herself by making contrasts, and in tormenting herself it was only natural to her to torment others. Some people cannot suffer and be content to see those around them free from suffering; if they are unhappy, their unhappiness must communicate itself to all with whom they are brought into contact, and of such was Lady Torrisdale.

She soon made herself so disagreeable that Mr. Guise was anxious to instal her in a home of her own. This she resented, while she accepted the kindness, which gave her once more an independent position. But was she not a countess, the widow of an English peer of the realm? And was the seclusion to which she was condemned her place in society? Was the comfortable household she could maintain such as befitted her rank? And there was Laura, who never had an ambition in her life, adored by her husband and the mistress of one of the finest estates in the west of England.

Sorely she tired the patience of Mr. and Mrs. Guise, and their conduct towards her at this epoch of her history is past all praise. But she was too restless long to remain in the pretty quiet home they had secured for her; she chose again to go abroad. Mr. Guise made a certain settlement upon her, and for some years she was seen no more at Guise Court. It was not till Laura was in her grave, and Florence nearly grown up, that Lady Torrisdale once again presented herself; and then she came urging her claims to be installed as the *chaperone* of her niece. Mr. Guise neither refused nor assented. He would make no promises, nor listen to any scheme of definite arrangement; still, he allowed Florence to go out with her aunt, who, with all her misfortunes, had conducted herself respectably; and for one season. Lady Torrisdale reigned paramount with her brother-in-law and *with his* daughter. But years had not improved her ladyship. *She had* grown more selfish than ever, more despotic, more *determined* to go her own way, whatever might be the cost.

Her temper had increased in acerbity ; her egotism was a thing unbearable ; her own claims and her own trials were the burden of her song ; and at last she led Florence such a life, and tormented Mr. Guise to such an extent, that he was fain to propose a second separation, and once more Lady Torrisdale returned to the Continent.

Not, however, to Paris this time. To all her other faults she had now added a miserable love of hoarding—not for money's worth, but for money's sake. *Saving* was the grand end of her existence ; “living within her income” was the theme which occupied her all the day and kept her from sleeping at night ; to add to her hoard was the only real pleasure of her life. She had become dyspeptic, and she disliked living alone, so she secured the services of a poor relation as companion. Fanny Tucker wanted a home, and she gave her a home—that is, she gave her a roof to cover her, a bed to lie on, food to eat, and the shabbiest of clothes to wear, as well as her own august protection, which of course was an advantage worth any young woman's consideration. But oh ! the price that Fanny Tucker paid for bed and board, and the privilege of residing with a countess !

They were living now at Boulogne, Lady Torrisdale and her companion ;—living in a cheap quarter and at a very cheap rate, and seeing very little society, either French or English. They occupied a small flat *au-troisième*—a stifling drawing-room, all dirty white and tarnished gold, with plenty of uncomfortable velvet couches, and the inevitable showy gilt *pendule* on the draperied chimney-piece ; a stuffy little dining-room, with a great shut-up stove in the corner ; two miserably furnished bedrooms ; a kitchen in which it would have been quite impossible “to swing a cat,” if any one had wished to indulge in so strange a recreation, and a closet beyond, where Babette and the pots and stewpans reposed in peace together.

Lady Torrisdale and Fanny Tucker found these *appartements meublés* almost too warm for human endurance when the summer heats set in. Babette, I suppose, was used to it, though every now and then she did emerge from her cupboard of a kitchen, looking as if the dissolving process

which was to terminate her existence had already begun, and declaring that the *potage* for the dinner of Miladi and of Mademoiselle would be the death of her! As for the drawing-room, or *salon*, Lady Torrisdale made it very much hotter than it need have been by giving way to her unhappy temper, and Fanny Tucker's condition was worse even than Babette's! Indeed the young lady would joyfully have cooked the dinner if the countess would have contented herself with Babette's society.

One burning June day, Fanny, who had been into the town on a superfluous errand, came back very hot and tired to find Lady Torrisdale cogitating over an English letter just arrived by post. For more than an hour she kept silence, and Fanny, unless compelled, never disturbed her ladyship's meditations. She had suffered more than once or twice for presuming to speak without being spoken to, though she was quite as likely to be rated for being sulky. At the end of an hour my lady addressed her: "Fanny Tucker, I will thank you to sit there no longer, wasting your time over that silly tatting. I am going to England, and you had better bestir yourself and see to the packing."

"Going to England!" was all that the startled Fanny could reply.

"Is there anything so remarkable in that, Miss Tucker? Did you imagine, pray, that I had grown too old to travel? But people in your station of life are so very easily surprised. People of rank never allow themselves to be astonished."

"Am I to attend your ladyship?"

"Certainly. Do you suppose a person of my condition ever travels alone? With my delicate health, too! But you have no consideration: young people now-a-days are quite absorbed in self."

Fanny wondered in what elderly people were absorbed if Lady Torrisdale were to be taken as a representative woman of her age; but she inquired meekly how soon they were to set off.

"That is for you to ascertain," replied my lady. "Go at once to the portress and inquire about the steamers; tell Babette meanwhile to get out the trunks. When you

return pack immediately and with all despatch, but *carefully*. I am not going to have my things spoiled as they were coming from Brussels."

Fanny hastened to make inquiries, and she found that in order to be quite certain on one or two small points she must go out again in the scorching noonday heat. She accomplished her errand, and then prepared to pack, under the inspection of my lady, who lay on one of the velvet couches, while Fanny emptied wardrobes, folded, unfolded, and re-folded dresses, filled trunks, and emptied them again, and refilled them, being vigorously scolded for stupidity and laziness all the while. Then various arrangements had to be made, and all these Fanny had to conduct, translating, as she best could, Lady Torrisdale's impertinent English into civil French, and bearing the whole brunt of her ladyship's growing irritation and displeasure. It was past midnight when the last trunk was strapped and labelled, and then Fanny had to pack her own things, which as yet were in their usual places. It was broad daylight long before she lay down, and the steamer left the quay at eight o'clock precisely.

On the voyage Lady Torrisdale condescended to inform her companion that they were going to Guise Court, that her brother-in-law was dying, and that it was highly improper that a girl like Florence Guise should be left without any female relative at such a juncture of affairs. "Were they expected?" Fanny asked; and the reply was, "Is that any business of yours, Miss Tucker? Go and fetch my grey shawl, and tell the captain he is not to let the boat pitch about in this style."

They had rather a rough passage, for a sudden gale sprang up, and poor Fanny was ill—so ill that she scarcely heard Lady Torrisdale's upbraidings. "What business had she to be sea-sick? what next would she choose to do?"

With joy Fanny saw the small grey town of Folkestone, for she hoped for a little rest. No such luck, however. Lady Torrisdale took third-class tickets, and pushed on for town. What business had Fanny to be tired?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

EVENINGTIDE.

THE storm was nearly over when Oswald and Esther drove up to the lodge. The heavy clouds were parting ; the hills on the opposite shore of the broad Channel gleamed out shadow-like in the ever-shifting slants of brilliant sunshine, and all the hedges and trees were glistening as with an infinitude of diamonds. The tempest-hour had passed, and all was brightness and peace where so lately had been gloom and strife ; and softly and sweetly fell the even-song of the joyous birds, warbling out their gladness among the dewy branches ; while, clear against the dark, receding thunder-cloud, shone forth the radiant bow, spanning, as it seemed, the still troubled waters from shore to shore, intense in its rich colouring, and casting far behind it its own faint, tremulous refraction.

“Lancelot will go crazy over that rainbow,” said Oswald, as they both turned to gaze on the splendid scene of glittering earth and sea, and chequered sky, and the ethereal bow of promise. “A chance of this sort is meat and drink to him ; he will sit down on some stile, or on the wet grass perhaps, and quite forget whether he has had any dinner ; and he will think himself supremely happy, till something comes to recall to him his true, luckless position.”

“And is that position so very, very unfortunate ?”

Oswald shrugged his shoulders.

“It could scarcely be more unfortunate. He is the eldest son of an old but hopelessly ruined house ; he is a gentleman, with all the aspirations and instincts of his order, and without any of the means which are required for the sustaining of his natural position ; he is heir to nothing but debts and perplexities, nor has he the energy, even if opportunity presented, to carve out for himself a way to competency, to say nothing of fortune.”

“*But he is a poet—a true poet, did you not say ?*”

“*Well, yes, I should say there is the real stuff in him ;*

but then, where is the use? What avails it that you have good store of merchandise if there is no market for your goods?"

Esther thought of the farmer's verdict that poetry was no yield. She was surprised to find that Oswald seemed to be very much of the same opinion, and she felt quite inclined to resent the inference. Now that she had seen Lancelot Digby she more than ever revered the poet's mission and his work, and fully recognised the poet himself as one of "God's prophets of the beautiful."

"I do not think," she said, "that success is the one thing in life, at least not the sort of success you are thinking of. One may fail in some things, and yet be quite happy, quite satisfied."

"It is wretched disappointment if you fail in the very thing in which you particularly desire to succeed."

"But need one ever utterly fail? Of course one's desire must be right to begin with; it must be something on which one can ask God's blessing, and then one must always strive and keep one's patience and hope; and surely, surely one will reap one's reward some day?"

"In most cases *yes*, decidedly. But for a moneyless, landless man like Digby to make the poet's bays his object in life is perfectly ridiculous."

"I wonder——" began Esther; and then she stopped, blushing crimson.

"You wonder what?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing! At least it was something I had no business to say."

"I should like to hear what it was, nevertheless. These impromptu, unbidden thoughts, which prudence tells us to suppress, are after all of the very essence of sound judgment and pure wisdom. It is not invariably true that second thoughts are best."

"I suppose not, though certainly it is wise to think before one speaks."

"Well, you have thought. Now let me hear what you wondered about!"

"*Indeed, I had rather not tell you, Mr. Uffadyne.*"

"Now, Esther, that is unkind. I really *must* know ; come now !" and he laid his disengaged hand on both hers, and held them tight. Her cheeks were glowing like the French poppies that crowned a rocky bank they were slowly skirting.

"Very well," she replied, suddenly yielding, yet with an air of irrepressible vexation. "I was wondering what would have been your first object had you not been heir of Guise. Of course it was impertinence to wonder at all about it, but the thought came, and I could not help it. It is your own fault that it is expressed."

"Of course it is my fault, if any there be, which there is not ; and I am only too pleased to find that you think me worthy of wondering about. Esther, I often wish I were not the heir of Guise. I should not care to be Lance Digby, but I should like to be Rupert ; I should like to have to make my own way in the world, to carve out my own fortunes, to have only my own brains and my own hands to trust to. I own to you that I am thoroughly discontented with my lot."

"That is not right," she returned, gravely. "You have a goodly heritage ; you ought to accept it as from God's hands, taking it in trust from Him, and making the very best use of it."

"I ought," he said impulsively. "Oh, Esther, if Cecil had spoken as you speak I might have run the career she once marked out for me. But she irritated me when she counselled ; when she would have spurred me on to noble action I grew stolid and indifferent ; and even her most earnest entreaties roused in me a mocking spirit of mingled antagonism and self-upbraiding. If I had only been born a poor lad, knowing that the world was before me, and that I must either lose or win in the race !"

"You must do that now," she answered, almost solemnly. "The race has always to be run, and the conditions are essentially the same, from whatever point we start."

"*Esther*, you are a very wise girl."

"*Oh*, no, Mr. Uffadyne ! But I have been a scholar in a *very hard school*. Experience teaches one many things. If

I have any true wisdom, I think I have to thank Miss Guise for it ; *she* is very wise."

"Rather too wise sometimes," said Oswald, impatiently. "Ultra-feminine wisdom is all very well till one finds it sitting down at one's own fireside."

"You seem very hard to please," returned Esther, with some displeasure ; and she was not sorry that their *tête-à-tête* must necessarily come to a conclusion, for just then they approached the side entrance of the Court, and Sam came out to take the ponies.

"Mr. Guise any better?" asked Oswald, as he assisted Esther from the carriage.

Sam shook his head.

"No, Mr. Oswald, he's no better. He never will be no more in this 'ere world. But he'll soon be in a better. And if it wasn't for our young lady, we wouldn't be sorry to hear it was all over, though he has been the best master that man or woman ever served. Miss Guise will be right glad to see you, Miss Kendall ; and here's Mrs. Maxwell coming."

Mrs. Maxwell took Esther at once to her own room. Her eyes were red with weeping, and weary too with the long watch she had kept. She had not been in bed for two nights.

The sight of the housekeeper's sorrow brought the tears into Esther's eyes. Suddenly she felt that she had been very heartless ; so lightly as she had talked at luncheon, so entirely as she had been absorbed in different topics of conversation during the drive from Chilcombe. She had been tranquil, cheerful, and even gay, while her best and first friend had been suffering all the anguish of an impending bereavement. Now she was eager to go to Florence, and weep with her over the parting close to hand.

"Can I go to Miss Guise?" she asked, as soon as she could speak ; "is she expecting me?"

"Yes, Miss Kendall, I know she counts upon your coming, and I hope you may be able to comfort her a little. I feel as if I hadn't a word to say to her, poor dear ; and as for Miss Cecil, I really think she made her worse, though Miss Cecil would have it that my master was not nearly so ill as was *believed*, and though she prophesied that he would rally

again and be down-stairs in two or three weeks' time. Will you come at once, Miss Kendall?"

Esther found Florence in the boudoir. She had just left her father's chamber at the other end of the gallery. A sad smile stole over her worn, weary face as she greeted her friend and bade her welcome; but there was a touching hopelessness in her tones as she said—

"It is nearly over, Esther. I came out just to give way for a moment. I could not bear it any longer; and *he* must not be disturbed."

"Does he suffer very much?"

"Not so much now, thank God! Every paroxysm of pain is less acute, and lasts for a shorter time. But he is sinking very fast; he is weaker now than he was an hour ago, and oh, so much weaker than yesterday! It is very good of you, Esther, to sacrifice your holiday, and to come and share my sorrow."

"Oh, Miss Guise, whose sorrows should I share if not yours? I have been very unfeeling not to care more deeply; but things seemed different at a distance. If I could only help you to bear this great grief!"

"No one but God can do that, Esther; but your being here will be a great comfort to me. How did you come?"

"Mr. Oswald brought me in Miss Ceeil's pony carriage."

"Then he is here now?"

"Yes. I left him in the side court giving directions about the ponies. He does not intend going back to the Chenies till to-morrow morning."

Florence sighed; it did not seem much of a relief to know that Oswald had returned. She felt extremely depressed and all alone in her great grief. Had Cecil's words come true—the words she had uttered long ago, when the engagement was first announced, when she declared that in the first real emergency Florence would find out how utterly unreliable was the man to whom she was betrothed? Poor Flossy! she looked very forlorn with her pale, careworn face, her golden *ringlets*, without their usual gloss, gathered back rather *carelessly*, and her dress, too, rather disordered; for she had *been lying* down on a sofa in her father's room while he

slept, trying to gain a little strength for the coming night. It was more than a week since Florence Guise had gone to bed in the regular way. No wonder that she looked faded, harassed, and even untidy. Nothing gives a woman such an extinguished air as sitting up night after night, longing for rest, and yet dreading that the dreary watch she is keeping may be the last, that the next night may come and find her patient vigil done, her loving toil all ended, her agonising suspense over, and instead the dead, hopeless blank of certainty; that happened which she most dreaded: her most miserable, bewildering dreams turned into reality. So it came to pass that the golden hair was tarnished, and the golden glory of life all dimmed and pallid. It was another Florence Guise that came to bid Esther welcome and to seek her sympathy.

Though there were traces of tears on Florence's white cheeks she was very calm now; she felt, poor child, as if she had exhausted the source of weeping, and could never cry again; yet her voice quivered and her hand trembled, and she was glad of the support of Esther's strong arm to lead her to a chair.

Esther at her desire rang the bell, and Virginie was desired to bring tea; but when it came Florence could scarcely touch it, and she went back to the sick-room, leaving her cup more than half-full, and the little strip of toast which Esther buttered so daintily undiminished. Cecil would have argued with her and told her she was wrong thus to neglect her own health, and she would have pressed the food upon her, giving her fifty cogent reasons for eating and drinking without delay. But Esther judged more wisely; just then it was better as well as kinder to let her alone.

Esther's own meal was a scanty one, and when it was finished she sat at the open window looking out upon the glittering sea, and inhaling the fragrance of the many flowers below. One large expanded magnolia was so near to her that she could have gathered it, and roses by the handful were within reach. Except for the dark cloud that still brooded heavily up Channel, and for the rain-drops still shining upon the trees and upon the turf, there was no trace of the

storm in the peaceful, lovely summer evening that seemed all the calmer and purer for the strife of elements that had preceded it. And the morning had been so grey and sultry, so gloomy and oppressive. It was the sad grey morning turned into the beauteous, golden eventide. And Esther, watching the bright sea and the amber mists upon the mountains, remembered how Mr. Guise had told her that the grey and the gold were interwoven in all lives, till the Golden City was reached and the clouds and the mists of earth dispersed for ever. For all that fair home's stateliness and its broad lands and the smiling landscape, there was more of the grey mingled with Florence's experiences than Esther had at first imagined.

Presently Virginie came to beg Esther to go to Mr. Guise's room, and she went half shrinkingly, for never before had she entered the chamber of death, standing face to face with the awful mystery of dissolution. She need not have feared; Mr. Guise was little changed, only the pale features were more spiritualised than ever, and the worn countenance shone with the settled peace that passeth all understanding. Heaven's own impress was on that calm face, and the light that never shines on earth or sea irradiated its quiet, settled expression: he was leaving behind him the rugged wilderness of this world, and before him were the golden hills of heaven.

"Come closer," he said, as Esther came near the bed; "my voice is very weak, and I want to speak to you, my dear. I am so glad to see you once more. This morning I was afraid I should not continue till you arrived. I wanted to say good-bye to you. Are you well and happy now, Esther?"

"I am quite well, Mr. Guise, and I should be quite happy, if—if,"—and her voice choked.

"Yes, I understand. Is Florence here?"

"No; she went away when I came in."

"That is well. I wanted to remind you of your promise."

"I have not forgotten it. I hope I never shall. I will repeat my promise, Mr. Guise: God helping me, I will be at

all costs and at all risks a faithful friend to Florence Guise. May He forsake me if I forsake her."

"Thank you; I trust you, Esther. It is very strange how much I rely upon you, not only trusting your will but your ability to befriend Florence should the hour of need arrive—and that it will arrive I cannot doubt. Then you will comfort her and help her?"

"As far as ever I can. I will leave everything and everybody to come to her side if she require me, if she wish for me."

"Esther, I must tell you that more and more I distrust Oswald Uffadyne. I am now almost certain that he does not love my Flossy."

"Oh, Mr. Guise, I think he does! Who could help loving her? And indeed I believe he regards her with affection."

"With affection—yes! But mere affection is not enough for married life. The affection that might degenerate into indifference, and sink into coldness, would only be a torture to Florence. She has known only tenderness, poor child. She has been my treasure so long. All the love that was her mother's I lavished upon her. She will never bear coldness and neglect."

"Surely she will never find it! Mr. Oswald must love her always; and, if I may say so, I think he would always love very warmly, even devotedly: it is his nature to do so."

"Esther, he is *unstable*. His likes and his dislikes are sadly ephemeral. I have feared it for long, and now I am very sure of it. Those passionate temperaments, those impulsive natures, that take our hearts by storm, and win our affections by their ardent expressions and demonstrations, are frequently made the instruments of our most painful discipline. Some persons seem born into this world to make the unhappiness of others; they are ever with 'one foot in sea and one on shore; to one thing' they are 'constant never.' They have one aim to-day, another to morrow; that which they adore this month they neglect the next. They cannot help it, perhaps; it is the result of unfortunate temperament.

But, oh, how much misery they are the cause of! what sobs of anguish they call forth! What bitter tears fall for them! What hours of secret, silent pain are spent on their account!"

"But Mr. Oswald is not all this; and I am sure he is sincere, and he *loves* his cousin."

"Yes, Esther, he loves his *cousin*, and there was my own fatal mistake; but my Flossy deserves something better than mere cousinly regard. And he is sincere, too, inasmuch as he professes nothing but what he feels at the moment. These impulsive people are always sincere in that sense; they never mean to deceive you; they never *mean* any harm: they only *do* it, and that most fatally. But we will not speak any more of this. I had not meant to say so much, only I want you to be my Flossy's true friend, and you can serve her and guard her more intelligently if you know the quarter whence danger is to be apprehended."

"Mr. Guise, may I say one thing?—it is rather bold of me though."

"Say what you wish."

"Would it not be better for Florence that the undeceiving, if it must come, should come now—presently at least—than when it is too late?"

"It would be better; and I have spoken to Oswald, but I confess he disappointed me. He would not hear of relinquishing his engagement, yet he avoided giving me the distinct assurances I longed for. I feel sure he regrets. I am certain he longs for freedom, yet he will not say so."

"But Florence loves him."

"Only too well! And what she loves once she will love always. Hush! here she comes."

"Well, papa, have you had your little talk with Esther?"

"Yes, my dear, though I have not said half I wished to say. I meant to say many things, and I quite forget them now, and my strength is gone. One thing more, Esther: never despair, however dark the day may be, remember past *mercies* and former blessings, and do not distrust God's *providence*. Think of the grey morning we spoke of once,

and of the golden eventide. At evening time there shall be light."

"Is it always so, I wonder?" said Esther, musingly.

"Yes! It is God's own promise; He will never fail those who trust in Him. One has only to wait in solemn patience, and sooner or later the clouds will break, and God's own glory will shine through."

"Some lives seem sorrowful to the end!" said Florence.

"A sorrowful life need not be all sorrow. Oh! dear children, it is your own fault if a thread of gold do not run through your whole life, whatever may be its aspect. It may be at first a very slight thread, scarcely discernible amid the tangle of rough grey and black strands, and sometimes all but hidden by the gayer and more dazzling gossamers of transient joys and pleasures; but it is there nevertheless, and it grows stronger and brighter every day, till it incorporates all the rest into its own pure radiance and beauty."

That evening Mr. Guise seemed strangely better; but for the almost celestial expression of the pale, worn face, Esther could have believed in Cecil's prediction: it appeared impossible that the end should be so very near. Suddenly, about nine o'clock, faintness came on. It had come before, often enough, but this seemed another kind of faintness; it did not pass away; an ashen hue gathered over the features, and when Florence touched his brow it was damp and cold. Then she knew that he would revive no more, and one by one stimulants and restoratives were laid aside: nothing could avail now, and life was ebbing fast away, but so quietly that but for the grey pallor they might have thought that he was gently sinking into sleep. And so, indeed, he was! into the calm, sweet sleep of those who die in the Lord; the sleep that comes when God lays His finger on the tired eyelids, and touches the throbbing heart, and stills the weary brain; the sleep that knows no waking till the voice of the archangel, sounding over earth and sea, bids the slumberer arise.

The crimson light was still upon the western hills, and the waters were still heaving and burning in the sunset

flush, when softly as a child sinks into its repose, came the last low sigh, the last long, quivering breath, the last faint smile. There was a slight tremor in the cold fingers that Florence held clasped within her own, a momentary fluttering of the closed lids, and all was over ; the weariness and the sufferings were for ever past ; the good and faithful servant had entered into the joy of his Lord.

And Oswald Uffadyne was master of Guise.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

NOTHING LIKE MONEY.

It was the third day after Mr. Guise's death—a day of wind and drizzling rain and tempest on the sea. It rained in the early morning, it rained and blew all the forenoon, and it rained steadily and heavily towards the evening ; it was the sort of rain which makes one feel hopeless of its ever leaving off. After the first few hours Florence's grief had been very quiet ; but she had been herself restless, unable to remain in one place, wandering up and down the galleries, and going from room to room, in a sort of silent wretchedness that was pitiful to behold. Esther was thankful when towards the close of that wet afternoon she consented to lie on the sofa in the boudoir and be petted and cared for. Cecil had been with her the day before, but she had gone home in the evening, accompanied by Oswald. Florence instinctively shrank from her companionship, though she forced herself to endure her consolations, and her exhortations on the subject of resignation to the will of God. It is so very easy to say "Thy will be done," when it is on another that the afflicting hand is laid ; pious maxims are cheap enough, and come glibly to lips that have never paled with anguish, but it is hard when lessons of submission are enforced by such dry-land voyagers ; and it is especially trying to those who have scarcely yet recovered from the *first shock* of their great sorrow ; such "comfort" is not the *most insignificant* among the trials they are called to endure.

Cecil was troubled because she felt that her attempts at consolation were unavailing. What she said was perfectly true, and she said it in the best way possible, and in a kind and gentle tone ; but the spirit of sympathy was missing, and her words fell without meaning on Florence's ears, or else they irritated her almost beyond endurance. Cecil's mission was certainly not to dry the orphan's tear, or to pour balm upon the wounded heart. One pressure of Esther's hand was worth more than an hour or two of Cecil's studied comfort, garnished with stereotyped texts of Scripture and orthodox lines of hymns.

That afternoon Esther and Florence were quite alone ; Cecil was to have returned, but the weather had doubtless prevented her, and poor Florence felt soothed by the absolute quiet, and at last fell asleep while Esther read to her. She had slept more than an hour, and Esther had not stirred from her low chair by the sofa ; indeed, she was falling into a half-doze herself, when certain sounds seemed to apprise her of some arrival. Probably it was Cecil come back again according to promise ; but why did she make such a bustle, such a disturbance in the house ? Cecil had not very quick perceptions on some points, and her strong-mindedness sadly interfered with her good taste, but she had a due sense of decorum, and that she should thus invade the repose which seems sacred to the house where the unburied dead are lying was altogether inexplicable.

Louder and louder grew the sounds, and presently Esther heard Virginie speaking evidently in distress. Florence's sleep was heavy ; she had fallen at last into a profound and natural slumber, and she was looking more like herself than Esther had seen her for some weeks. No, it could not be Cecil ! Esther began to feel quite wrathful, and she rose very quietly and glided to the door, which she opened gently without waking the sleeper. Then she heard Virginie in a loud whisper declare that Miss Guise could not be seen by any one ; that she had refused to receive the rector of the parish that very morning ; that she could not and would not announce anybody contrary to expressed orders. Then *something was said* about Miss Kendall, and Esther, hearing

herself appealed to, thought it was high time to inquire the cause of the disturbance. So, softly closing the door behind her, she stepped out into the gallery, and perceived two strangers advancing from the great landing, and Virginie doing her very best to bar the way. A tall, dark, stern, middle-aged lady, and a gentle, sweet-looking young lady, with a subdued expression, were the visitors who came in such untimely fashion.

"Oh, Miss Kendall," began Virginie, the moment she perceived Esther, "will you tell these ladies that my young lady cannot see any one?"

Esther came forward, and the elder lady demanded imperiously, and at the same time with a singular abruptness—

"Who are you?"

"I am Esther Kendall; I am here at present to be of service to Miss Guise, who is in great affliction."

"I know all about it; I wrote to Miss Guise a month ago, and her answer to my letter brought me here. Be good enough to announce me; I am Lady Torrisdale!"

"Miss Guise has only just fallen asleep, and it would be a pity to wake her. Shall I show your ladyship into the drawing-room?"

"You will show my ladyship into the boudoir, where I understand Miss Guise is to be found. Fanny Tucker, get out of my way!"

"Do not let us disturb Miss Guise," said the person called Fanny Tucker, in an imploring tone. But her patroness merely replied, "Don't be a simpleton!" and pushed on to the door of the boudoir in spite of remonstrance and even some show of resistance from Esther.

But meanwhile Florence had wakened up; indeed, Lady Torrisdale's elevated tones might have roused the seven sleepers; and she was sitting upright on the sofa when her aunt opened the door and exclaimed, "Ah, Florence, my dear, they told me you wished to see no one, but of course I knew you would be only too glad to have *me* with you. I *made up my mind* to come the moment I received your letter, and I came at very great inconvenience and with the *utmost speed*, as Fanny Tucker can testify. I have not

brought a maid with me ; indeed, with Fanny Tucker for *dame de compagnie* I do not require one, though she is far from as attentive as I could wish. And so your poor father is gone ? ”

Florence could not reply, and Lady Torrisdale settled herself comfortably in the arm-chair. “ Well, well, it is of no use to fret, my dear. No regrets will bring him back again, you know. There would be some sense in crying and wailing if it did the slightest good, but it don’t. And really, when any one has suffered as much as your father, I think it is a great mercy when God calls him to Himself. I am sure you have been a very dutiful daughter, not sparing yourself, and waiting upon him day and night to the last, and all that sort of thing ; and that must be your consolation, my dear, so pray don’t begin to cry again. I am come to take charge of you, and that will be a great comfort to you. And now I wish you would order some dinner, or tea, or something. I am quite exhausted, I assure you. I was coming on yesterday, but I broke down in London, and had to rest, and that stupid, inconsiderate Fanny Tucker chose to be sick coming over. Such affectation in a young person ! I am never sick making the short passage, and I am convinced it is nothing but giving way that does it. Of course I do not like the rolling and tossing, and I think it is a great shame there are not better boats and more efficient captains in the service ; but I do not care to make a spectacle of myself either on deck or in the ladies’ cabin. Indeed, I think it is highly indecent, as well as disgusting, a most unladylike exhibition. And though I scolded her the whole time, she never seemed to heed, but went on before all the sailors—*ugh !* ”

“ Probably she could not help it,” said Florence, mildly. “ No one would be sea-sick if it could be avoided. It is a most distressing malady. Where is Miss Tucker ? ”

“ I left her in the gallery. Of course I do not wish to intrude my companion upon you. I daresay she will take care of herself.”

“ Esther,” said Florence, “ would you take charge of Miss Tucker ? She must be very tired and unwell. And please tell *Virginie* to prepare the blue room for Lady Torrisdale.

Would you like to go to my room, aunt, to take off your things? Virginie will soon see that all is ready for you."

"Who is that young person?" inquired Lady Torrisdale when Esther had left the room. "She had the impertinence to deny you to me. I do not at all like her manner."

"Miss Kendall is my friend. My dear father thought very highly of her, and he wished her to remain with me as long as she could."

"Where does she come from?"

"From Chilcombe. I had told her that I could not see any one. She was only carrying out my own instructions, so you must not find fault with her on that score, please, aunt."

"Oh, I thought she was some sort of maid, or humble companion. She is so very plainly dressed, though I must say she has a certain air about her. She had better give that absurd Fanny Tucker a cup of strong tea. She has imagined herself ill till she has really made herself squeamish. I have a great mind to get rid of her, and get some one stronger and better tempered. These young people in subordinate stations do give themselves such airs in these radical, shockingly democratic days, when all sorts of people set themselves up against their betters."

"Shall I take you to my room, aunt?"

"No, I thank you. I will rest here awhile. I do not care to move just yet; that horrible conveyance jolted me nearly to death, and they charged shamefully, and the driver had the conscience to ask for a *pourboire*. Of course I did not give it to him. I never encourage drinking among the lower classes. But I will have a cup of tea here, if you will tell your people to bring it, and then I shall do till dinner. Of course you dine at eight?"

"No; we have given up the late dinner a long time. Early hours suited, and to-day we made our luncheon serve for dinner; but I will ring, and send word to Mrs. Maxwell that you have not dined."

Florence rang and gave her orders; and then Lady Torrisdale recommenced her catechism.

"Where is Mr. Oswald Uffadyne?"

"At his own home at the Chenies."

"Guise Court is his home now, and of course you will have to move as soon as it is possible. You cannot stay in another person's house, and that person your own betrothed husband. It is extremely indecorous, let me assure you, and I know what society demands."

"Of course I shall leave in a few weeks ; but Oswald would be distressed at the thought of hurrying me ; and there will be many things to attend to as soon as I can give my attention to them."

"No doubt ; a death always makes no end of work and turmoil, and it is not decorous to stir into anything till after the funeral. I am a great advocate for decorum ; in these degenerate days it is not properly observed. But you need not trouble yourself about matters. I will attend to your affairs. I will take everything into my own hands, and save you all the trouble."

"Thank you, aunt," said Florence, with some hesitation ; "you are very good, but I think Oswald will have to act."

"Of course, of course ; but I will protect your interests. Some one ought to look after your interests certainly."

"Oswald would do that if they needed looking after. But everything is extremely simple, and no fresh arrangements are required. Besides, his interests and mine are identical."

"That is all nonsense ! He is not your husband yet, and he is the next heir, and therefore your natural enemy."

"Aunt, I wish you would not say such things ; but you do not mean them !"

"I do indeed. And I am not sure that a contemplated marriage improves your position."

"Dear aunt, if you would only let these things alone just now ! I am not equal to them ; and indeed you must not speak so of Oswald."

"Tush ! I am not so sure about Oswald Uffadyne. Of course he wanted the heiress as well as the estates, and of course he will take care of himself."

"Mr. York comes down on Monday, and he will take due care of me. I am sure I wish I were not an heiress."

"*Absurd nonsense !* If you were to try being as poor as I

am, I can tell you you would soon want your heiress-ship back again. There is nothing like money for giving one real, solid comfort and satisfaction. Of course good birth is to be valued. It would be shocking to be connected with horrid tradespeople ; but still, if I could not have both money and pedigree, I should choose the former. It is such an unspeakable comfort to think you have money in hand, money that you need not spend, money that you can look at, and feel with your fingers, and go to your drawer and *count* ! I am afraid you have never been taught to save."

"I never thought of saving money. Why should I?"

"It is the duty of every one to save something, be his income large or small. It gives one confidence, and one feels stronger, abler, and more satisfied with one's self, when one has a little store to fall back upon."

"But why should you save, aunt? Would it not be better to live up to your income, and be comfortable?"

"I could not be comfortable if I spent all my income. I must put by something for old age. But, Florence, you might make my income larger. You will have your money in your own hands now, and I am your mother's own sister, you know—the nearest relative you have in the world."

"Nothing will be in my power at present. Everything is in the hands of executors, and the property is tied up, I know ; but what I can do I will. I do not care for money, and if you like it I will try to give you some."

"You are a good girl, and I will do all I can for you. You may count upon my protection. I will live with you at Little Guise, and be a mother to you. Of course Mr. Uffadyne cannot visit you unless you have a chaperone. When are you to be married?"

"We do not speak of such a thing at present."

"Indeed! Why not?"

"How can you ask, aunt? Is this a time to talk of wedding festivities? It was always understood that I could not leave my dear father, and Oswald was good enough never to press it. All such affairs can be considered when I am *settled at Little Guise*."

"Well, I shall not want to hurry you. I daresay we shall

be very happy together ; but what shall I do with Fanny Tucker ? What a fool I was ever to saddle myself with that girl ! And of course she will never marry ; I shall have her on my hands till she is a vinegary, shrewish, sour old maid. I hate old maids ! ”

If Florence had not been very amiable, she might have thought she hated ill-mannered, money-loving widows. She knew perfectly well that her father had chosen for her chaperone an elderly lady whom he held in great respect, and that it was his expressed wish that Lady Torrisdale should *not* reside at Little Guise. He had added to her settlement on the express understanding that she did not interfere with her niece.

Florence knew all this, and much more ; but she kept silence. Mr. York would say all that was necessary ; and in the meantime she need not concern herself about the future of the luckless Fanny Tucker, whom, however, she pitied very heartily, whatever might be her deserts, resolving to show her every kindness so long as she remained at Guise Court.

So when Lady Torrisdale once more took up the subject, proposing that Fanny should turn nursery-governess, or learn millinery, Florence would not give her opinion, only remarking that she would be happy to entertain Miss Tucker as her guest as long as Lady Torrisdale remained in England.

“ Oh ! as for that,” replied her ladyship, “ I do not think I shall go back to Boulogne at all ; I am sick of foreigners and foreign ways, and disreputable English professing to be residing abroad for the benefit of their families. I always keep my affairs so that they can be wound up at any moment ; and I left everything in ship-shape behind me, and I could make all arrangements by letter. Babette is on board wages, of course. I might send Fanny Tucker over, but that would be an expense ; and she has no more idea of economising than that Persian cat. I hate cats ! Oh, dear ! how that omnibus thing did shake me ! ”

“ You surely did not come from Chilcombe in the Turk’s Head omnibus ? It is altogether springless ! ”

“ What else had I to come in, pray ? ”

“ There are post-chaises to be had, and flies ; and there is

a very nice little brougham on hire at the Uffadyne Arms, but of course you would not know about that ; and they would not tell you at the railway, for they are all for the Turk's Head people there."

"I should not have used it if I had known it. I have no spare cash to lavish on broughams, and flies, and chaises. A fool and his money are soon parted ! The drive, or the jolt rather, is over now, and I am some shillings in pocket. But my bones do ache, and it brought back Fanny's sickness. Still I saved the money, and shillings are shillings, you know. So many shillings saved are so many shillings gained, and what I economise I put by. There is nothing like money, take my word for it !"

CHAPTER XXXV.

OSWALD ASTONISHES ESTHER.

ESTHER would have gone back to Chilcombe now that Lady Torrisdale seemed domesticated at the Court, only Florence begged her to remain, and she agreed to stay till the very last day of her holidays, which, after all, were extended from a fortnight to three weeks.

Lady Torrisdale quickly discovered her position, and immediately commenced a sort of guerilla warfare, which involved in its issues both Esther and Florence. The latter she rated severely for forming so unsuitable a friendship, and the former she treated with a disdain that would have been simply ridiculous had it not been sometimes very hard to bear with anything like common patience. Fanny Tucker, on the whole, had rather a better time of it than usual, her august patroness being too much taken up with correcting the follies of her niece and impressing upon Esther her true position in society to have much leisure for spying out the small faults of her own companion. Her ladyship also was enlightened upon the subject of Miss Guise's chaperonage. *Mrs. Lester* was expressly named in Mr. Guise's will ; and quite as expressly it was stated that in default of Mrs.

Lester, Miss Guise was to choose any lady she pleased, except her aunt, Lady Torrisdale. But her own settlement was increased by a hundred and fifty pounds per annum, and that circumstance reconciled her to the destruction of the airy castle she had been building ever since she had received the letter which brought her so expeditiously to England. Nothing would have pleased her so much as reigning lady paramount at Little Guise, for, of course, she would have saved her whole income, and made very pretty pickings out of Florence besides. It would have been more than a hundred and fifty pounds extra in her pocket, she calculated; but then it would probably have been but for a short time only, since Florence would be married at the expiration of her mourning for her father, and Lady Torrisdale scarcely saw in what capacity she could establish herself in the household of Mrs. Uffadyne-Guise. So, after all she was not very much disappointed; "things might have been worse," she affirmed, and she signified her intention of returning to Boulogne with Fanny and her augmented income, and all the odds and ends she was accumulating during her visit, as soon as ever the estimable Mrs. Lester should appear. But Mrs. Lester was in Ireland, welcoming her first grandchild, and it would be the end of August, or perhaps September, before she arrived. After all, some small difficulties were smoothed away by Lady Torrisdale's presence at the Court, and when Florence signified her intention of paying her travelling expenses both ways she became quite gracious, and purred her satisfaction very much as if she were an elderly, complacent pussy-cat.

"But don't suppose," she said to Fanny Tucker when she announced to her the good news, "don't suppose I am going first-class, or any of that nonsense. I may, perhaps, go back second-class, for third-class is inconvenient to a person of my rank, and the horrid people smell of onions, and gin, and strong tobacco. Of course it is only Miss Guise's duty to pay our expenses, since I came purely on her behalf, and she, of course, never thinks anybody can travel by any other class than first; but that is no reason why I *should be extravagant, and throw my money away on*

cushions and mock gentility. A draper's wife could not travel third-class without putting herself on the level with all sorts of miserable plebeians; but a countess may go by luggage-van if she choose, and she is just as much a lady of distinction as if she travelled in her own coach-and-four, with all her people in attendance."

But for all these charming and fortuitous circumstances she continued to snub Esther Kendall. In vain Florence placed in her hand a fifty-pound note for travelling expenses; in vain she gave her yards of silk, pieces of linen and calico, breadths of fine cambric, remnants of lace, quires of writing-paper, lengths of velvet, lots of embroidery, huckaback and diaper at discretion, two or three gold chains, a gold eye-glass, an opera glass, a Dent's chronometer, and a diamond ring;—her ladyship was implacable, and so evidently deemed it her duty to insult "that young woman" that Florence, since she could not turn her mother's sister out of the house, was rejoiced as the time drew near for Esther's return to Chilcombe.

It came to the last evening of Esther's stay at Guise, and she and Fanny, who had become good friends, had planned a walk to the ruins, where she had been sheltered with Lancelot and Oswald three weeks before. But Lady Torrisdale, getting scent of the project, immediately put her veto upon it, so far as Fanny was concerned. She wanted Miss Tucker at home that evening; besides, she did not approve of young ladies wandering about the country at all hours of the evening; it might do very well for an under-bred village schoolmistress, but it was highly improper for Miss Tucker, a gentlewoman by birth, and well known to be under the protection of the Countess Dowager of Torrisdale. Also, Fanny showed very low taste in wishing to associate with a young person of the inferior classes.

Poor Fanny! She heartily wished sometimes that she belonged to the inferior classes herself; she was tired of paying so dearly for her aristocratic privileges, and she had serious thoughts of turning schoolmistress or lady's-maid, or learning the dressmaking, or anything else that would enable her *to free herself* from the hard and bitter bondage under which *she groaned*. So Fanny, being forbidden to walk with "that

young woman," was constrained to obedience, but Esther, being her own mistress, concluded to make the expedition by herself, at least in part. Florence wanted a message taken to the village, and she volunteered to carry it, intending to return home by way of the ruins. The roads were perfectly safe, and the locality was so retired that there could be no impropriety in Esther walking about unaccompanied, provided she returned in reasonable time.

It was about half-past seven when she reached the ruins; not a creature was to be seen, and she sat down and mused as she had mused in Helmsley wood, her thoughts taking rather a different direction. She was wondering what it must be to be a poet; wondering, too, whether Lancelot Digby was still staying at the lone cottage on Templemoor, and wishing she could see some of the verses he had composed. Only that afternoon she had been turning over a "Tennyson," which lay about in the morning-room, and reading with avidity "The Poet's Mind"—

"Bright as light and clear as wind!"

How pure a transcript of such a mind was written in Lancelot Digby's face! How plainly it showed that the soul, looking through it—

"Saw through life and death, through good and ill,"

and even through its own unfathomed self.

"With echoing feet he threaded

The secretest walks of fame;

The viewless arrows of his thoughts were headed

And winged with flame."

That he would one day succeed, and prove to farmer King and to Oswald Uffadyne that poetry was some "yield," she never doubted, but she longed for the day to arrive, and she wished he knew how entirely he had her sympathy. A distant church clock struck eight, and Esther felt that it was high time to be turning her face homewards; she had promised Florence she would not be late, and it would take her exactly three-quarters of an hour to reach Guise Court, *going by the shortest way through the park.* As she reached

the green lane which led up-hill to the high road where she had first seen the poet sheltering under the trees, she saw some one coming towards her in the full light of the setting sun. It was Oswald Uffadyne.

"You here !" he said, eagerly taking her hand. "I hail this as a good omen. I want to speak to you, Esther ; would you mind turning back to the ruins ?"

She immediately consented, thinking he wished to say something about Florence ; he had not been to Guise Court for some days : he and Lady Torrisdale could not keep the peace.

"How is that old harridan ?" was his first question.

"Do you mean Lady Torrisdale ?"

"Of course I do ! Is she still at the Court, and as venomous as ever ?"

"Yes ; she remains some time longer, I believe. I cannot say she is more amiable. I really think Miss Tucker's life is harder than mine used to be with Mrs. Hellicar."

"If I were Miss Tucker I would sooner turn washer-woman than be in thralldom to such a dragon. Cecil says you return to Chilcombe to-morrow."

"Yes ; I return to-morrow morning, immediately after breakfast. Mrs. Maxwell is going to Chilcombe, and we are to drive together."

Then there was a long silence, and Esther wondered what was upon Mr. Uffadyne's mind. Whatever it was of course it concerned Florence ; and by way of saying something she remarked that Florence was much better, and in quite as good spirits as could be expected. But Oswald scarcely seemed to hear ; he stood leaning against the lichen-stained buttress of a grey battlemented wall, his hat slouched over his eyes to defend them from the dazzling westering sun, and his hands nervously twisting a long piece of clematis he had gathered in the lane. More and more Esther marvelled at his strange absorption and at his singular and evident constraint.

She had not to wonder long, or, rather, she soon had cause *for redoubled* wonder, for Oswald burst out into a strain that *for several minutes* made her stand dumbfounded and aghast

before him. He was telling her that he had made a grand mistake ; that he had never loved Florence ; that he was the victim of family expediency ; that he was resolved at all costs to free himself from an engagement in which his heart had no share ; that he loved her, Esther Kendall ; that she only was the queen of his affections, and none but she should ever be his wife ! How long he would have continued speaking thus it is difficult to say ; but Esther's look of scared horror silenced him at last, and then came her question—

“Are you mad, Mr. Uffadyne ?”

“No. You think it is a sudden resolve. Esther, I always knew that there were depths in my heart that Florence had never sounded, that with all her sweetness and goodness she could never touch, for there were no affinities between us. The moment I saw *you* I cared for you, though I did not even guess it ; I often thought of you when I was away in London and in Paris—then came your accident, which I caused, and while you stayed at the Chenies I learned to love you as I never loved any woman ; but I did not know how much I loved you, how entirely I was bound to you, till I drove you to Guise three weeks ago. Will you be my wife ? If you refuse me, I shall never marry. I will not give my hand where my heart cannot follow. Will you give yourself to me, Esther ?”

“*No !*” burst from Esther's pale lips almost in a shriek : “a thousand times, *no !* How dare you speak so to me, Mr. Uffadyne ? How dare you tell me that you love me ?”

“I would dare tell a princess I loved her if, at the same time, I could ask her to be my wife.”

Esther burst into tears. Oswald would have taken her in his arms, but she shrank back, exclaiming—

“No, no ! you are wicked, shameful ! You cannot mean it ; you should not insult me so ; it is unmanly, unkind.”

“Not mean it, Esther ? Hear me. I vow——”

“You shall make no vows to me ; pay them where they are due. Did you think so badly of me as to count upon my being false to Florence, to Florence—to her whom *of all people on earth* I love, and honour, and revere ? Mr.

Uffadyne, you must be dreaming, or delirious ; even if you were free I should be no suitable match for you : I am not of your order."

"I do not care for such vain distinctions, and I say you *are* of my order, of Cecil's order, only Providence placed you in an humbler sphere, and—"

"We will not discuss the question, please, because you *are* not free. I will not listen to you any more than if you were already the husband of Miss Guise."

"One word, Esther ; if it were not for this engagement, which, at all events, I cannot now fulfil, *could* you love me ?"

"No ; I could not, not in the way you mean ; you would not suit me."

"That is plain-speaking ; but I have thought, Esther—I thought three weeks ago, when we drove over together—"

"Do not tell me what you thought ; but forget all this, Mr. Uffadyne. I will keep your secret, and Florence shall never be pained with the knowledge of to-night's brief madness. I am going home ; please not to accompany me."

"Must I not ? I am going to Lancelot Digby, on Temple-moor. I will take the road by the cliffs. But, Esther, one word more—"

"Not one ! I have heard too much already. When I see Florence I shall feel miserably guilty, though I am not to blame. Good night, Mr. Uffadyne."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ESTHER IS MISUNDERSTOOD.

ESTHER went home to Guise Court with wildly beating heart. How changed were the summer landscape and the sunset sea since she had climbed the rocky road from the village scarcely an hour before ! What was the thunder-storm to this ? No convulsion of nature could have smote her with greater terror and confusion than had this strange *and undesired* revelation of Oswald Uffadyne.

"*He loves me !*" she said scornfully to herself, as with

trembling lips and burning cheeks she slowly crossed the park. "He is mad; he is deceived; he does not know what he is saying. I, his wife! I, the only woman whom he will ever marry! Have I gone to sleep, and dreamed it all? or am I crazy myself, and have I fancied the whole conversation? It is so astonishing, so utterly incredible. I should quite as soon have expected a declaration of affection from farmer King. Why did I go to those luckless ruins to-night? oh, miserable fatality! And how shall I meet Florence?"

It was time to calm herself, for the house was now in sight, and walking on the flowery terrace were Miss Guise and Lady Torrisdale. Esther would have avoided them by going in at the side entrance; but Florence beckoned to her, and she had no alternative but to obey. Lady Torrisdale was looking grim as ever, and she regarded Esther with haughty disdain as she watched her ascending the broad steps from the lawn. Florence was very pale, and the traces of tears were still on her face. She looked sad and weary as she stood in the red sunset light, which fell with ruddy gleam on the rich masses of her rippling golden hair. Certainly Lady Torrisdale was by no means an inspiring companion; and her liveliest conversation was depressing to any one situated as was Florence Guise. But as Esther stood on the topmost step between the huge grey vases filled with scarlet geraniums and dazzling blue lobelia, it flashed upon her like an inspiration that Florence had other causes for grief than those she openly avowed. She had felt Oswald's indifference; his coldness at a time when she needed his utmost tenderness had struck to her heart. The last three weeks had been replete with repressed anxiety and unconfessed misgivings. All at once Esther understood many little things which had sorely perplexed her; and other things that had passed unnoticed at the time wore a new and startling aspect, a strange significance, seen in the light which had suddenly burst upon her senses. Ah, that light! it was like the flash which dazzles and bewilders the night wanderer in an unknown country, showing him lurking dangers all around, fatal precipices, deep pools of silent water, treacherous marshes, and perhaps wild beasts glaring at their defenceless

prey. One moment the lurid blinding flame, the next impenetrable darkness, its terrors augmented by the brief illumination.

"Esther, you are not well," said Florence the moment she came close to her ; for Esther's colour had faded, and when she tried to speak in her accustomed tone her tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of her mouth. "You have walked too fast ; you are out of breath," pursued Florence. "Rest in that garden-chair awhile."

"Yes, I have walked too fast," said Esther at length. It seemed the best solution of her evident fatigue and breathlessness. She accepted with positive thankfulness the interpretation which Florence gave to her pallor and distress ; it saved her from a present difficulty, at least. But my Lady Torrisdale was not so easily satisfied ; suspicion was a part of her nature, and she had nourished that amiable quality till it had acquired such large dimensions as to overtop and overgrow every other quality, save indeed that of money-hoarding, with which it seemed intimately associated. People who love money and hoard it are, as a rule, the most suspicious creatures under the sun, attributing to those with whom they are in any way associated the worst and oftentimes the most impossible motives. Lady Torrisdale was a remarkable exemplification of this rule, and as she mistook hoarding for prudence, so she also confounded caution and suspicion. She might have been brought up a Jesuit, so complete was her belief in casuistry, and so rarely did she give any person the credit of speaking the simple truth in singleness of heart. She fixed her dark, stern eyes on Esther's altered face, and observed that in her humble estimation Miss Kendall seemed rather *flurried* than tired ; for her part, she did not approve of young women taking solitary evening rambles, and if they met with adventures which they did not like to confess, they had only to thank their own self-will and imprudence.

"Has any one frightened you ?" asked Florence, earnestly. "I heard there were gipsies at the end of Templemoor lane yesterday."

"Oh, no, I was not frightened ; I saw no gipsies," replied Esther, whose dry tongue and parched lips would scarcely let

her speak intelligibly. "Only I am so very tired, and my head aches. I had better go to bed at once."

"Headaches are very convenient," sneered Lady Torrisdale. "When people do not choose to give a proper explanation of their conduct they generally take refuge in a headache. Florence, this young woman ought to be made to give an account of herself. Appearances are very suspicious, I can tell you. Yes, you may look calmly incredulous, but I am older than you, and I know the world. When a girl leaves the house well and cheerful and perfectly composed, and comes back two hours afterwards as white as a sheet and as scared as a hunted hare, it does not require much penetration to discover that something has transpired in the interval. I don't suppose it would be of any use questioning her, for she would only tell a pack of lies; but if it were Miss Fanny Tucker——"

"Aunt," said Florence, with spirit, "Esther never tells lies, and I will not have her troubled."

"Oh, very well. But every one tell lies when it suits their purpose, as you will find out before you are half a dozen years older, Miss Guise. Why, I caught your fine Mr. Oswald in a lie the other day."

"Hush, aunt!"

At Oswald's name Esther's colour came back inconveniently, and when she perceived Lady Torrisdale gazing at her with the cunning, peering eyes of an inquisitor, the blush deepened into a fiery glow that seemed to scorch her from head to foot. Brow, and cheek, and neck, and even the tips of her fingers, were of a burning scarlet, and not only had she to meet her tormentor's malicious scrutiny but the mute, innocent surprise of Florence herself.

"What is the matter, Esther?" she asked. "Something must have happened. You look so—so——"

"She looks *guilty*," interrupted Lady Torrisdale, "and guilty she is. No wonder she cannot meet your eye. Young women don't turn that colour at the mention of a young man's name for nothing. There's something clandestine going on between this girl and your lover, Miss Guise, or I am not Countess Dowager of Torrisdale. Have it out with her at once. Don't be a coward or a fool on the score of false

delicacy. Sift the whole affair to the very bottom. I'll help you ; I am used to ferreting out the truth. I rather like the excitement."

But Florence replied steadily—

"No, thank you, aunt. If Esther has anything to tell me that I ought to know she will tell it presently without being questioned, and I do not see why Oswald should be supposed to be implicated in the imagined mystery."

"Oh, yes, you do, my dear," sneered Lady Torrisdale again. "You know you don't trust him. Why, if he went and fell in love with a Patagonian giantess or an Esquimaux dwarfess you would not be astonished. Ah, I never had any opinion of the Uffadyne-Guise alliance. I always told your poor father it was a mistake, but he never would listen to counsel. He was a good man, my dear, but weak, very weak in judgment. When the engagement was announced I knew how it would end, I always said how it would be ; and you must do me the justice to own that I warned you."

But Florence could bear no more. She turned and fled as if she were the accused person, and when Lady Torrisdale again reverted to Esther she also had left the terrace, and was following Florence into the house.

At the drawing-room door Florence paused, expecting Esther to come in.

"Never mind that disagreeable woman, Esther, dear," she said. "I can't help calling her so, though she is my aunt. She is always trying to make mischief. She was wicked enough once to interfere between dear papa and mamma, and that set papa against her and made him insist on her ceasing to reside with us. Never mind her, Esther ; come to my room and tell me all about it, for I cannot but perceive that something has occurred."

"I have nothing to tell, Miss Guise !"

Esther would have given the world to speak naturally ; but all her old ungraciousness came back upon her, as it always did when she was actually troubled, and her tones *were hard and abrupt*, her face gloomy and repelling. It was *the old Esther* of Queen Square, not the blithe young mistress of Chilcombe school. Florence regarded her mournfully—

"Oh, Esther, I thought you would be open with *me*! I felt sure you would speak unreservedly when once we were alone!"

"I have nothing to speak about. I wish I might go to bed."

"You shall go. I will not keep you: only tell me—did you speak to any one while you were away this evening?"

"Please to excuse me; indeed I cannot answer any questions now, I must have time to think."

"Truth and sincerity, in so simple a matter, may speak without thinking," said Florence, gravely. "But I see you will not be frank, Esther."

"Let me go now; my head aches so much that I hardly know what I am saying."

"Well, go; it is not kind of me to keep you; I can see your headache is no excuse. Only one thing, dear—do not fancy that I give any weight to Lady Torrisdale's wild, foolish words about Oswald: whatever has transpired, he can have nothing to do with it. I know you are as true as gold, for all this sudden mystery."

But, in spite of herself, Florence could not help some interrogation in her tones: the sentence which referred to Oswald was more of a question than an assertion. It was too dark now to see Esther's face, but she answered quietly, "I am true to you, Miss Guise! I think to you I always shall be true! You may trust me. Good night!"

And while slowly she went to her own room, she said to herself, "Oh, that I knew how best to show my truth! If there were any person in the world in whom I could confide! I am so inexperienced; I am so bewildered! Oh! what shall I do? Oh, cruel, wicked Oswald, how I am suffering from your fault!"

Esther had intended to bolt her door at once, and refuse admission to whomsoever came, unless it were one of the servants with her supper, which she resolved to take in that she might not provoke remark. But in the deep window-seat, where that very afternoon she had been herself sitting lost in *sweet and tranquil musings*, sat Fanny Tucker, *demolishing a rose*.

"Oh! I beg your pardon," she said, as Esther entered. "But I did so want to speak to you, and coming here to wait for you seemed my only chance. How late you are! It is well I did not accompany you; I should have had an hour's scolding at the least, and another sin would have been added to the black catalogue of my offences! Happy Esther, to be free and untrammelled, if only you do what is right! But may I stay and speak to you?"

"Yes," said Esther, absently; "only I cannot talk much. I am come to bed; my head aches intolerably."

"I would not trouble you, if you were not going back to Chilcombe to-morrow morning, and there is no saying when I may see you again; for I am not a free agent. I wish I had thought of it before."

"Thought of what before?" and Esther as she spoke was conscious of excessive ungraciousness in tone and manner. The old feeling of wrong and misery and confusion was strong upon her. She was not at all the self-controlled and happy Esther of the Slade. Fanny, of course, noticed the difference, but she knew that headaches did not tend to make people amiable, and she supposed that Esther was suffering. She replied apologetically, "I am very sorry I troubled you to-night. I only wanted to ask you whether you thought there would be any chance of my obtaining such a situation as yours, if I tried. Lady Torrisdale is talking of going back to France, and, oh, I should so much rather remain in my own country. It is not as if she were really poor, or an actual invalid. She can afford to hire a companion, and I am so weary of the life I lead I would rather go out as nursery-governess—nay, I think I would sooner get a place as kitchen-maid, than remain the slave and drudge I am. You cannot imagine how hard it is to bear; and it is making me impatient, fretful, rebellious. If it were my duty to remain, I think I would, cost what it might; but I cannot see that because my mother was the late Lord Torrisdale's second cousin, I am bound to accept this lot as *my only* alternative; besides, she is always threatening to *dismiss me*, and she would not scruple to do so at an hour's *notice* could she thereby further her own ends, or in any

way better herself as she imagined. I have been thinking of it for months ; shall I not dismiss myself ? ”

Esther was roused to interest ; also the glimmering of an idea came into her mind as Fanny spoke—an idea which seemed like a sudden inspiration. “ Take a situation like mine ? ” she said earnestly. “ Ah, Fanny, you could do far better than that. You are educated, well-bred, accomplished. If you made up your mind to turn to teaching, you might secure something far better than such an appointment as mine. My stipend is only £40 a-year, and I have to board myself. I am not complaining, mind, oh, no ! I have ample for every want, and both Cecil and Miss Guise have been very generous ; I scarcely need spend anything on dress. But with your qualifications you might enter a nobleman’s family, and earn £100 a-year. Why, the governess at the rectory has sixty guineas.”

“ Forty pounds a year and my freedom would be like a fortune. I have not anything like that sum at my disposal now. Lady Torrisdale buys me cheap clothes, or gives me her cast-off raiment. This old lustreless blue-black satin figured in West-end drawing-rooms when William IV. was king. Now and then I get a few shillings by way of pocket money ; once in a moment of unwonted expansion she actually gave me a golden sovereign !—the only one I ever had of my very own. I took it because I knew I had earned it, and much more besides.”

“ I should think so indeed. You save her all the expense of a maid. Fancy Virginie, or any other of her guild, being satisfied with shabby old dresses and a stray sovereign. A properly hired lady-companion would want at least thirty or forty pounds as stipend, and privileges ; and a regular maid would not be content with an annual wage under twenty pounds. But even if you deemed my salary sufficient, Fanny, you would not like the position. I need not tell you I do not take rank as a lady.”

“ I should not care about that. I was born a gentlewoman, I suppose, and nothing can alter that. If I had to take in clear starching, or do plain sewing—I do plenty of that now by the way—I should still be just the same

Francis Alice Tucker, supposing always I did not conduct myself unworthily. I am tired of an artificial life, and I hate pretension, and there is so much of it in ordinary governess life. I am weary of making sacrifices to gentility. Such a life as yours would suit me exactly if I could only find another Cecil Uffadyne. I have half a mind to consult her. I think she does not object to patronage."

"You are not taking into account your pupils; they would be mere village-girls. The daughters of small farmers and little shop-keepers would be your most select scholars, and their manners are very rough; and then their mothers! Oh, dear me!" said Esther, remembering that passage-at-arms with the mother of Belinda Smith.

"Neither they nor their mothers could surpass Lady Torrisdale in down-right roughness. An insult now and then from a person who knew no better would be as nothing compared with the daily and hourly insults received from a woman of my own class, and one who acknowledges me as her relative. I am no coward, Esther, no fine lady, and that stupid bugbear yclept gentility will never be an 'Old Man of the Sea' on my shoulders. I want to work to get my living honestly and respectably. I must be respectable if I am not genteel, you know; but I want to earn and to eat my daily bread in peace and quietness, and it is time I had a little leisure I could fairly call my own. My dear Esther, I should feel like a princess if I had only your advantages. I could positively save out of my forty pounds a year, I believe. Perhaps, being older, and, therefore, more experienced than you are, I might command a rather higher salary—who knows? Anyhow, I could certainly save something, for I have lived with Lady Torrisdale till I have learnt all sorts of shifts, and contrivances, and economies, and thrift; what is mere sordid stinginess with her, would be only rational prudence on my part. As I am all alone in the world I surely ought to save something against a rainy day. My 'keep,' as I hear it continually called, would not be *much*, and the plainer my dress the more consistent it would be with my situation. Oh, I could do very well. Would

you mind opening the subject with Miss Uffadyne? She might object to help me; but I think not."

"Fanny!"

"Well? How strangely you look, Esther! or is it the flickering candlelight on your face?"

"Will you—would you like to take my place at Chilcombe?"

"What can you mean? No, indeed; I would not for the world take you from so happy and suitable a home, and from good and tried friends. But I would take a similar place if one presented itself—if I could find one, that is to say. Take *your* place, indeed!"

"Suppose I wished to give it up?"

"I cannot suppose anything so impossible. You would be wild if you threw up such a situation."

"What if I took yours?"

"Esther Kendall, you are crazy! You have lost your senses. Give up the green pastures and the still waters that God has assigned you for a crazy tenement on the crater of Vesuvius! Resign obscurity and happiness for mere variety and wretchedness! You cannot be in earnest?"

"But I am. I wish to go abroad; I should like a change."

"That is not your true reason. You have too much good sense, too much stability of character, to rush at a most uncertain good and a most certain evil in this offhand, inconsiderate style. What will you gain by going abroad?"

"Much. I shall gain a knowledge of other languages than my own; I shall gain fresh experiences and new ideas; I shall infinitely enlarge my sphere of observation. I have always heard that a residence abroad is an education in itself."

"To some extent that is true. There is always much benefit to be derived from foreign travel, but English home-life has its advantages also, and very great advantages too. Besides—forgive me, you say it yourself—you are still hard at work on the very elements of education. Why not rest quietly at Chilcombe for two or three years, adding to your *mental stores*, laying securely the foundations that were

neglected in your childhood, and awaiting some better opportunity of seeing the world and enlarging your experiences ? ”

“ Fanny, I think I can trust you ? ”

“ You may. Any confidence you may repose in me shall be sacred.”

“ I can only give you the fragments of a confidence. I cannot explain. I shall have to resign myself to being misunderstood, even by Miss Guise. I can only say so much, Fanny : I want, for reasons—powerful reasons, of course—to get quite away from Chilcombe. It is a sense of duty that urges me to go—not, as my words may have led you to suppose, the mere desire for excitement and a restless love of change. Only to you I say this. If I go, other people must believe that I go of my own pleasure and free will. Fanny, will you not help me ? It seems to me that we may mutually help each other.”

“ Esther, I think I divine your secret, but I will not breathe it even to you.”

“ Pray do not ! ”

“ I will not. Still I cannot yet feel assured you are doing the best thing by running away. This is no step to be taken at haphazard.”

“ I think, nay I am almost sure, it is best that I should put the sea between me and Chilcombe—and Guise.”

“ But you must not decide in a hurry. We must reflect as calmly as we can, and, Esther, we must tell God all about it, and ask Him to direct us.”

“ Ah, yes, thank you, Fanny ; I have been forgetting God. I will try to put it into His hands. If it be good for me to go He will put it into Lady Torrisdale’s heart to accept me in your place ; if not, some other way will be opened, or I shall have strength and wisdom given me to stay at Chilcombe in honour and right doing. Shall we say ‘ good-night ’ now ? ”

The two girls kissed each other, and Fanny Tucker went away wondering if it were written in the decrees of Providence that she should be the mistress of Cecil’s school.

Esther remained a long time at the open window, looking

out on the calm, starlit, summer night, and thought and prayer went on together till the rosy flush of early dawn was on the glimmering sea. Then she slept heavily, and woke to find that she must rise instantly and dress with all speed if she would be in time to accompany the housekeeper to Chilcombe.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

PROSE AND POETRY.

WHILE Esther was wending her way sorrowfully through the park, Oswald was making great strides towards the lone cottage on Templemoor. He found his friend at home, busy with the *Epic* which was some day to give him wealth and fame, and to carry down his name to the latest posterity; but he was tired in spite of the pleasure which he took in the beloved and self-appointed task, and it was a relief to throw aside the roughly scribbled sheets and enter into conversation with the lord of Guise.

A true poet's chamber was Lancelot Digby's. It was, as he had declared, "meanly furnished," and extremely bare as regarded not only luxuries but such things as Oswald held to be the positive necessities of life. It was uncarpeted, save by one small, dingy strip of drugget by the bed, which was a queer, rickety, old-fashioned four-poster, covered with a patchwork quilt, the only merit of which was its cleanliness. Bed and windows—for there were two casements—were alike curtainless. An antiquated chest of drawers, a few rush-bottomed chairs, and a sturdy table of oak in the middle of the room, constituted the whole of the furniture, if we except a huge bath which was rolled away into a corner and half full of manuscripts and shabby books.

But the view of which Lancelot had boasted—that indeed made amends for interior deficiencies, and to the occupant of the chamber at least atoned for all that was missing in the way of carpets, draperies, and cushioned couches. It commanded all the country round for many a mile, the broad, glittering Channel, and the low purple hills, faintly defined

along the opposite line of coast. It was a glorious comingling of wild rocky heath, grey cliffs, green wooded slopes, soft hazy distances, and shining sea; and now hill and dale, sea and shore, earth and sky, were flooded with the rich sunset-light of the lovely July day; and in contemplating the magnificent prospect even Oswald forgot for the moment his annoyance. Nature had sown her riches broadcast around the poet's humble domicile, and granted him a full supply of such wealth as made him, according to his own account, "luxuriously poor."

They contrasted rather strangely, those two friends: Oswald, well dressed, graceful, and extremely handsome; Lancelot, in a shabby dressing-gown, awkward in his movements, and what people generally would call hard featured, if not extremely plain. But then such people had never seen his smile—a smile of such exceeding and radiant beauty that it often fairly startled its beholders, and sent them away wondering how they could ever have thought its owner lacking in good looks. In spite of countless outward advantages, Oswald always felt a certain sense of inferiority when he lingered for any length of time in Lance's presence.

"Welcome!" said Lancelot, as he grasped his friend's hand. "It is so late, I scarcely expected you. I wish I had a bed to offer you, but I am afraid that couch of mine would scarcely suit you; there would be something more than doubled rose-leaves to complain of. How fast you have walked! you look heated."

"I have walked rather quickly, very quickly I suppose, and—and—I may as well say it at once—I am troubled, vexed, stung to the quick!"

"What is the matter?"

"I am sick of everything, weary of my life."

"Heigho! That means, Oswald Uffadyne, that you want something you cannot get. You lucky fellows, favourites of fortune, always pout and grumble if the capricious dame withholds the smallest of her fairy gifts; while we whom she *snubs* on principle thankfully receive the slightest token of *her grace*. Is it a true Sybarite case of crumpled rose-leaves, or do the nightingales make too much din, or is it that some

bright particular star refuses to come down out of its sphere for the sake of Oswald Uffadyne?"

"Don't jest, Lance! I am not in a mood to bear it. You think my destiny one of the fairest; you count me as an enviable man?"

"I think your destiny is a fair one, though of course you may make it a foul one if you choose; many of us are permitted to give the colouring to our lives. God puts certain materials into our hands, and we use them or misuse them at will. Yes; and many people would count your lot as enviable. I do not; but then I would rather be Lance Digby with an empty purse, and the barren honour of an old name, than I would be any prince or magnate of the land!"

"I believe you. Lancelot, I have a case to put to you."

"Not a legal one I hope, for I know nothing of law beyond the Decalogue."

"It is nothing legal, though it may touch legal obligations. Listen, Lance: suppose you were rich——"

"I really can't. I could as soon imagine myself an Esquimaux or Haroun al Raschid. I never had a sovereign to spare in all my life. It must be a queer sensation to feel your pockets full of money, and know that you can draw at will upon your banker. I wonder what it is like, though I had the faintest foreshadowing of it this very morning. I just caught a glimpse of El Dorado, that was all."

"What do you mean?"

"I received from the editor of the *Grosvenor Magazine* a very polite letter, and a *cheque* for ten guineas. I say Oswald, what capital fellows editors are."

"Especially when they enclose cheques."

"Ah! but you who never earned a sixpence, and never wanted one, cannot appreciate the luxury which I had all to myself this morning. I have so often been disappointed. Over and over again my best things, things which I feel in my heart *are* good—for I believe in myself, spite of rebuffs and failures manifold—have been returned, sometimes declined 'with thanks,' sometimes without. Editors might just as well be courteous always, and give us poor authorlings the

sugar-plum of a kind word ; and the sensation I experienced when I read this letter—is it not a horrid scrawl?—was something so superlative that I am afraid it never can occur again. I looked after the old postman to see if he had not turned into a fairy prince ; and as for the cheque, I would frame it and hang it up for contemplation if the cash it represents were not so very useful, and my requirements so very numerous.”

“ Most heartily I congratulate you, Lance ; and I congratulate the editor of the *Grosvenor* on his superior discrimination, and we will drink his health in Johannisberger if you will come with me to-morrow to the Chenies.”

“ I cannot say about that ; but your case ?—you are forgetting to put it. Well, I will try to suppose that I am rich. What then ? ”

“ And lucky, in the estimation of your fellows, and while you are still young, and care for nothing and nobody in particular, though you are in universal charity with mankind, circumstances drift you into an engagement with an amiable and beautiful girl, who is also an heiress, and with whom for family reasons it is highly expedient that you should ally yourself.”

“ There is no supposing about it. Of course you are referring to yourself, and to your engagement with Miss Guise. Better drop the supposing, and put the case quite plainly. We all know that you inherit the broad lands of Guise, and that you are betrothed to that beautiful Florence, who is heiress enough, in spite of the entail which excludes her from the full succession, and gives you the inheritance as next male of kin. The estates are yours. You are lord of Guise. The lady is won, and a sweeter and fairer lady-love could never man desire. What is the hitch ? Why, you look as glum as if another heir had appeared to dispossess you.”

“ I wish there had ! I wish Guise were at the bottom of the sea, or that Florence herself were sole mistress of the place. Bother the entail which so stupidly excludes the *female line*, and yet permits the issue of such line to succeed ! *Why, Florence herself*, though cut off by this accursed entail,

may have a son who will inherit it in virtue of being his mother's son."

"Very probably, since her son and yours promise to be identical."

"I am not going to marry Florence Guise."

"Oswald, you astonish me! Is this a lover's quarrel, pray? Have you changed your mind?"

"It is no quarrel; the poor child has no notion of what I have been going through. The fact is this, I love my cousin right cousinly, but I do not love her as I should love the woman who is to be my wife. I *never* loved her. I liked her as boys will like a pretty cousin, and my uncle took advantage of this youthful attachment, and proposed the joining of the estates, and the large fortune which he would leave his child. I had seen no one for whom I could possibly care. My uncle hinted that I had already won Flossy's affections, as indeed I had, and I began to think I could not do better. Florence was as sweet and good as she was beautiful, and there was no barrier in her heiress-ship, since I was heir of Guise. I began to fancy myself really in love, and the very next day I proposed, and was accepted."

"That was almost three years ago?"

"Yes, Florence was in her seventeenth year—only just leaving the schoolroom; I was barely of age."

"Is not the discovery of your mere cousinly regard for Miss Guise quite recent, and very sudden?" asked Lancelot gravely.

"Long ago I suspected that my attachment was not of the right sort; but then I thought it would do well enough for every-day wear. I believed that the luxury of a *grande passion* belonged exclusively to sentimental poet-fellows like yourself. Now I know that we are all vulnerable; now I believe in—

"‘Love at first sight, first-born and heir to all.’"

"Which simply means that you have fallen in love with some other young lady, and wish to break off your engagement with Miss Guise?"

"Presuming that you are right in your surmise, would it

be for her happiness that for honour's sake, for my word's sake, I kept seeming faith with her ? ”

“ *Seeming* faith ? No. Faith, pure and true, is sterling gold ; seeming, *false* faith—if I may use such a strange term—is of the basest metal, and it tarnishes and corrodes directly you begin to use it. At any cost be what you seem, and that which you cannot be do not seem.”

“ But there are the estates. I take Florence's ancestral home and refuse to take her with it. I enter in and enjoy the inheritance, and absolutely drive her from it. What will the world say ? ”

“ Never mind the world ; what does your own heart say ? ”

“ It says nothing definitely. I only know that I do not love Florence Guise, and that I love another.”

“ And does that other know it ? ”

“ She does ; I spoke to her about an hour ago. I told her that if she were not my wife I must live and die unwedded.”

“ Oswald Uffadyne, you have been most unwise. I am afraid you have been almost dishonourable. And this new love of yours, does she return the sentiment ? ”

“ Confound it, *no* ! At least she pretends to be indifferent, though I must say her scorn, her indignation, seemed very real. But having confessed so much I will tell you all.” And there and then Oswald entered into fullest detail, giving Esther's history as far as he knew it, with all her obligations to Florence. It was dark when he finished speaking, and Lancelot kept solemn silence. “ Well,” said Oswald, impatiently, “ I have told you all now ; you know as much of the matter as I do myself. What have you to say ? ”

“ I have to say, Oswald Uffadyne, that you have acted a most unworthy part. I have to say that you have not been honourable : that you have been selfish, cruel ; that you have caused the unhappiness of two very estimable young women. I am ashamed of you.”

“ Thank you ; I came for sympathy, and I get hard words.”

“ Sympathy I cannot give you ; but I pity you.”

“ And you would have me keep my old engagement ? ”

“ No, not as things are. A man cannot do a woman a

greater injustice than to marry her as a point of honour. If she be such a woman as I believe Florence Guise to be, she would sooner die than accept all a man has to give *save his heart*. If I were a woman, I think, even though I stood at the altar, I should be thankful to be undeceived before it was too late. If I knew that in the smallest degree my lover swerved from the faith he had pledged, if in the least I doubted his loyalty, if I did not know that his heart was absolutely mine, all mine without reserve—that next to his God he loved and worshipped me, I would resign him. I would not permit him to pronounce irrevocable vows. But, Oswald, it is a fearful thing to trifle with a woman's happiness. Are you sure that your passion for Miss Kendall is not a mere fancy? May not the old love be the real thing after all?"

"I tell you there never was any love. Now, for the first time, I know what a true affection is. And the girl spurns me!"

"I honour her for it. She must be a rare creature. I never knew my sister Edith so taken with any one."

"And what am I to do?"

"I really cannot tell you," said Lancelot, coldly.

He had no notion of such unmanly behaviour; he could not help despising Oswald for his boyishness, his want of steadfastness, and for his weakness in seeking to lean upon another's counsel; thus striving to dissemble with his conscience and to lift the weight of responsibility from himself.

"I must do something, or I shall go wild!" exclaimed Oswald, lashed into frenzy by Lancelot's calm displeasure. "I deserve your pity rather than your blame. Fate has been unkind to me."

"Do not accuse fate. You have been very unkind to yourself and to others, and I do pity you, I pity you from my heart."

"Yes, as you pity the poor wretch who must undergo the extremity of the law next Monday morning for killing his wife in an access of jealous fury. I thank you, Lancelot Digby! I counted upon a kindly sympathy from you, and

I find cold pity, contempt, reproach ! You are not a real poet after all. Where is the bard whose heart is not touched by the sorrows of a lover ? ”

“ There is no poetry in untruth, no pure romance in fickleness. I am sorry for you, but I cannot feel with you. Don’t look so furious. You are behaving like an angry school-boy. You have done wrong, and you know it.”

“ You contradict yourself. You said a minute ago that I ought not to marry Florence on the strength of mere cousinly regard and only for honour’s sake.”

“ And I still say so. I do not blame you for not loving Florence or for loving Miss Kendall. I do not even blame you for allowing yourself to be led into an unsatisfactory engagement, for you were very young—you did not know your own feelings at the time, and a strong persuasive power was brought to bear upon you. But I do blame you that you yield straightway to passionate impulse. It was hard not to speak, I know ; but hard things have been done and can be done again. You should have waited, you should have watched yourself ; you should have done anything and borne anything rather than throw yourself at that girl’s feet, situated as she is and as you are with regard to Florence Guise. You cannot be too thankful that you had a sensible, virtuous, high-minded young woman to deal with.”

“ I believe you are in love with her yourself.”

“ I am not. But if I were I should not rush to tell her so to-morrow morning, for I have no right to marry, and for a long time to come mine must be a solitary, hard-working life. You are going ? ”

“ Yes, I shall sleep at Underleigh Mill, and fish up the mill-stream to-morrow. I am very miserable, and thoroughly disappointed in you, Lancelot Digby. So much for prose and poetry ! ”

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AT THE SLADE AGAIN.

IN the grey gloom of a lowering morning Esther left Guise Court. She had breakfasted early with Mrs. Maxwell, but Florence came and sat with her for a quarter of an hour, while the good lady was making up her list of orders for Stannington. There was a constraint on both as they sat on opposite sides of the table ; Esther doing her best to dispose of an egg and some coffee, and Florence playing nervously with her watch-chain and pencil-case, uttering short, disconnected common-places in a voice which did not seem to belong to her.

For the first time Esther longed to get away from Florence. A cloud between true friends is felt more painfully than a very tempest of wrath between those who care little comparatively for each other ; and in such cases separation is sometimes an immense relief.

Both girls were glad when the form of breakfast was over, and Virginie looked in to say that the carriage was coming round, and yet Florence could have wept with sadness and from her sense of isolation, while Esther, as the parting moment came, felt as if her heart was breaking. She almost hated Oswald for the misery he had brought upon her.

As they stood in the hall Florence drew Esther into the little waiting-room and shut the door.

“One moment, dear,” she said. “There is something you have to tell me ; will you not write it ?”

“I cannot promise. Oh, Miss Guise, why will you not trust me ? You would if Lady Torrisdale were not here to insinuate her unkind opinions.”

“I do not regard my aunt, but your reserve pains me ; and yet I have no right to inquire into your concerns. Don't think, because I was the means of bringing you here, I am wanting to act the lady-patroness. I wish that we should be friends ; papa wished it you know ; but friendship has its

rights, and one of them is frankness ! Mystery has slain many a warm friendship, many a happy love, and it is the fruitful parent of deceit and treachery."

"Dear Florence, there is neither treachery nor deceit in my heart. I cannot open it to you just now ; the time may come when you will confess that, if I was not quite right, I acted for the best. But I am not afraid for God and all His holy angels to look into its most secret depths. If your father sees us now, he is not chiding me ! if dead eyes can see, his see only love and truth and tenderness in my conduct towards you, singular as it may appear."

And the colour came back to poor Esther's pale cheeks as she spoke ; not the blush of shame and of conscious guilt, but the glow of trusting innocence, appealing to the Righteous Judge of all the earth, and a rapturous light flashed into her dark eyes as she added : "I cannot speak now,—the time will come, I daresay, when I may say all that is in my heart, and you will not be ashamed of me. I am content to wait ! Good bye, dearest and best friend ; God bless you, and make you as happy as you deserve to be !"

And, with an embrace that was almost fierce in its strength and ardour, Esther tore herself away from the gentle arms that would have detained her. Another moment, and she felt she might have been betrayed into the most perfect unreserve ; she might have been tempted to relieve herself of the weary burden of secrecy, at the expense of inflicting upon Florence the most cruel pangs of suffering. She did not know how much Florence had suffered already.

She was not to get away without a parting thrust from the Countess. Her ladyship was among the flower-beds, sniffing loudly at the heliotropes, and taking a sort of constitutional before breakfast. She managed to cross Esther's path, as if by accident. "Good-bye, Miss Governess," she said, standing so that Esther could not pass her without actual rudeness. "I hope you have learned a lesson from last night's adventure. I know all about it ! Yes ! you may start and crimson up ! and there is that scared look in your eyes again, the look that a wild creature has when it is brought to bay ! But I happen to know, Miss Esther, that

you met a *young man* at the ruins last night—met him by appointment!”

“I met no one by appointment, Lady Torrisdale!”

“Oh, no! of course not! Such interviews are always the result of accident. But if you go on in this way, you will lose every shred of character you have, young woman! I speak for your good; and I shall have a word with Miss Uffadyne; she ought to keep a sharp eye upon your proceedings. Yes! I do speak for your good; you are a clever girl, and if I had you in my hands I would make something of you. I would soon cure you of dandying after young men! Fanny Tucker dares not speak to a gentleman: I never allow followers in my household; not the ghost of a lover comes near the young women who have the honour to be under my protection. A little discipline would do you all the good in the world.”

“If your ladyship thinks so,” replied Esther, gravely, “perhaps you would try me, in case of Miss Tucker’s removal. I should like to go abroad, and I would serve your ladyship faithfully. And as for young men, I should be very glad to have nothing to say to them.”

And perceiving that she could pass, she did so, and ran round to where the pony-carriage and Mrs. Maxwell were awaiting her. It is difficult to say which was the more astonished, Lady Torrisdale at Esther’s unexpected appeal, or Esther herself at her own impromptu boldness.

The cloudy morning turned into a wet day before Esther was put down at the well-known gate. Mrs. Maxwell had prepared for a nice confidential chat, but her companion had been unwontedly silent, and she could only suppose that she was sorry, and naturally too, at leaving Guise, and loth to go back to her monotonous every-day work of school-teaching. She thought it was a hard trial for a girl in Esther’s position to lead the sort of mixed life she did—one day a lady at Guise or at the Chenies, the next dining in the farmer’s kitchen, and earning her living as the village schoolmistress. If she had only been “a governess in a family” it would have been so much better, thought the good housekeeper, “and so much more genteel!” For, unlike Fanny Tucker,

Mrs. Maxwell worshipped at the shrine of that stupid Dagon, "gentility."

"Well, child!" was Mrs. King's remark, after she had kissed Esther, and taken away her wet cloak, and brought her a glass of ginger-wine; "Guise has not improved you; it has washed all the colour out of your cheeks, and made your eyes as dim and heavy as if you had been sitting up at nights ever since you went away. And you are thinner, unless I am deceived."

"It has been a very trying time," said Esther, the tears rising hot and fast now that the stern necessity for control was over. "It has been very hard for Miss Guise."

"I suppose so; they were so wrapped up in each other, father and daughter. Poor thing! poor thing! Not all the wealth and rank in the world, you see, can comfort one, when the hand of God is laid upon one in chastening. These great folks feel the anguish at parting with those they love best, just as much as the humble cottagers there, or the hardworking tradespeople and artizans in the town yonder. And, so fond of Miss Guise as you are, I don't wonder that her sorrow fell heavy upon you; and there is something about a house where death is, that lies like a weight upon you—grief and dread and solemnity all mixed together, as one may say. I should not have liked to see you coming back gay and lively and full of spirits; but I don't like your looking so thin and pale and peaky! I am glad you are back; you will soon get up your roses again. I shall make you drink a cup of new milk every morning the first thing. It's a fine remedy for any sort of ailment; it's good for the old and for the young, and it will make you pick up your flesh and get comely and blooming again in no time. I was so proud of your improved looks. That swaggering cousin of yours, he says, 'Well, Mrs. King, Esther has turned out a regular fine girl upon your hands; I think I must try Chilcombe air myself when I want to get handsome.' And Mr. Oswald—but I won't tell you what Mr. Oswald said; it might make you conceited. Dear me, child, how nervous you've grown; you've spilt half your wine on that nice black dress. There, wipe it off; it will spoil the

crape trimming. I suppose Miss Guise gave you your mourning?"

"Yes; she insisted on my having two nice dresses to begin with—this one, and a pretty neat black and grey gingham for mornings. And then she would give me a handsome black silk she had lying by her, not made up. It must be my company-dress for many and many a day. And Virginie made me a neat black bounnet."

"Very generous of Miss Guise! There, the crape won't hurt now! What were we talking about? Oh, Mr. Oswald—I was saying—"

"Tell me how the farmer is. And where is my Kitty? And have you seen Miss Cecil this last day or two? And did Miss Digby call?"

"Bless me, child! you are putting me through my Catechism. Well, the farmer is pretty well but for a touch of lumbago, and very busy too; and Kitty is quite well, only dreadfully mischievous. If she hear your voice she'll soon come prancing in. I daresay she is in the great barn; she is learning to mouse as well as her mother. And the new yellow rose is in splendid flower. I never did see such a bloom, Esther; there will be such fine trusses in about ten days that I am not sure whether I will not send one or two of the best to Stannington flower-show. And the foliage plants are doing well too; that thing like a fine crimson nettle is grand, and so is that large silvery leaf, so deeply cut, and so like pearl-grey velvet; only I cannot remember their names. I will get you to ask the gardener at the Chenies, and then we will write them down."

"I know the names of them all. I found them out at Guise, and the names of many more, and I wrote them down for you. And I begged buddings of the finest rose you ever saw, you are to graft them on a Manetti stock, Pearson says; and I have brought you some seedling China asters, or German asters, I am not clear which, and a new kind of tropæolum—that is nasturtium, with very handsome little flowers and blue-green leaves. But have you seen Miss Cecil?"

"To be sure I have; she was here yesterday, and she

wants you back ever so. 'I don't know how it is,' says the farmer to me, 'but the girl is a favourite everywhere ; she gets the liking of all the gentlefolks.' And the farmer was right pleased, I can tell you ; he has got to feel as if you were one of our own girls come back again. You've always reminded me of that little one we buried twelve years ago. She would have been a fine young woman by this time, and a great comfort, no doubt. But God's will be done. She is better off where she is now, and I often think the Lord sent you partly to make up for her. I hope you'll stop with us for many a year yet till you get a goodman and a comfortable home of your own, and it will be time enough to think about that in five or six years to come. Boys and girls don't know their own minds nor each other's ; how should they ? They had far better bide awhile, and come to a sound judgment. So I hope we'll keep you, my dear, till the new creeper I planted this spring has climbed up to the chimney-tops, as they tell me it will if it flourishes, in less than seven years' time."

Poor Esther ! she was nearly choking. She had never so fully realised how safe, and sweet, and happy a home this was, nor how motherly and fatherly were the true hearts of these kind people towards her. And she must go away—go far away—where she would not see them for years and years, perhaps never again. And the more she thought about it the more she felt that she must leave the neighbourhood. For Florence's sake, for everybody's sake, she must exile herself ! Oh ! what would Mrs. King think of her ? what would the farmer say ? And what could she say herself to Cecil ? She almost hoped that Oswald would repose full confidence in his sister, though how Cecil would take it she could not at all imagine. She hoped, too, that Mr. Uffadyne had not confided in Mr. Lancelot Digby, to whom he said he was going when they parted at the ruins. Though it would not matter, for if she went away out of the country she would probably never see Lancelot again, though she would be sure some day to read his poetry, and hear how famous he had become. She did not know that his poetry was some little "yield" already.

“And,” continued Mrs. King, “Miss Cecil begs you will go up and take tea with her at seven o’clock. She is quite alone, and dines early to-day, and she wants to see you particularly. And Miss Digby did call, and I made bold to ask her if she would condescend to come and see my bees and flowers as soon as you came home ; and she said she would so prettily, such a perfect lady as she is, in her poor cotton gown, not so good as our Patience wears on Sundays ; only she wears it, does Miss Digby, as a duchess might wear her silks and satins on a royal birth-night party. Now, my dear, I must go and see about the dinner. Patience always scorches the joint, you know, and she’ll boil the peas—marrowfats they are, such beauties !—all to a smash.”

And Esther went upstairs to her own pretty room, and lay down on her bed, hoping to get some rest that might do her head good, and wishing, also, that she knew what she ought to say to Cecil about going away from Chilcombe.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

“IT IS ALL MY DOING.”

ALL the afternoon Esther was revolving in her own mind what she could say to Cecil about leaving Chilcombe. Her greatest fear was that Miss Uffadyne would extract a full if not a free confession ; *she* would never be content with a partial or unsatisfactory explanation, the whole truth and nothing but the truth being Cecil’s usual requirement ; and she was rather famous for forcing people into a candour which was quite contrary to their own wills and judgments, and which they afterwards bitterly repented. Not that Cecil betrayed trust, or took undue advantage of confidence either reposed or extorted ; it was simply that she was inconsiderate, and, with the best intentions in the world, too frequently allowed her impulses to outrun her discretion. And at that moment Esther heartily wished she had to deal with a person of slower perceptions and less emphatic enunciations, to say *nothing of the persistency* which always carried Cecil to the

exact point she desired, either sooner or later, according to the difficulties or opposition to be encountered.

To be quite ingenuous was or seemed to be out of the question ; Cecil was the last person to whom she could speak openly. She supposed that honour required her to keep Oswald's secret ; certainly it was necessary that it should be sacredly kept for Florence's sake — above all things, she must never know what had transpired, nor must she even guess at it, which perhaps would be, on the whole, worse than knowing all about it. For Florence's dear sake, then, if not for Oswald's, she felt that she must submit to the displeasure of her best friends, and to misconstruction by all. She did not even like to think of what the village gossips would say about her, when they found her career as schoolmistress so abruptly terminated ; there would be suppositions and oblique hints, and all sorts of opinions would be current respecting her sudden and unlooked-for exodus. Esther would have felt much more uncomfortable on this point if she had known that Belinda Smith's mother had seen her turn down the green lane towards the ruins with Mr. Uffadyne !

“ Ah ! ” thought Esther, as she was dressing to go to the Chenies, “ I little thought how soon my promise would be required of me ! I promised — and, oh ! how willingly — that I would be while life lasted Florence Guise's true and faithful friend, even though for her I must leave all other friends, and renounce all other happiness, save that of serving and loving her. Yes, I promised that it should be so, at all risks, and at all costs ; but I did not think that one of the costs would be leaving Florence herself ! — that in order to ensure her happiness I must renounce her precious friendship, a friendship hallowed too by the sanction of one gone from among us. How little things turn out as we expect. I fancied myself devoted to Florence, ministering to her, and caressing her when all the rest of the world had deserted her, giving up everything and everybody to be with her ; and now I must give up all I care for to go away from her ! Oh, *cruel, cruel* Mr. Uffadyne ! Men are selfish ! if they can *gratify their own feelings*, they think nothing of the suffer-

ing they may cause ! But there are some good men, I am sure—quite good, as Mr. Guise was. I do not believe that Mr. Digby would ever have acted as Mr. Oswald has. If he had ever loved a girl, such a girl as Miss Guise, I know he would never have changed. Love for Lancelot Digby will be love for life !—I saw it in his face ! I wonder, though, if he do love any one ! Is there any one he always thinks of—not in a boyish, mawkish sort of way, but lovingly, reverently, most tenderly, as of the woman who will one day be his wife ? If there be such an one—and there *must* be, of course, for he is quite old, five-and-twenty, Mr. King said—she must be a very happy girl ! She will not mind waiting for him any number of years, she will not mind so much if they never can be married—she would rather be his betrothed to her life's end than give so much as her little finger to another man. Besides, she will be always his wife in heart ; he will write to her all his beautiful thoughts, and he will read his poems to her ; and, oh, how she will glory in his success ! and, oh, how proud she will be of him ! It must be such an intense joy to be proud of one's husband, justly proud of him before all the world ; also, in the deepest recesses of one's soul, to be able to say, ' O God, I thank Thee for this man whom *Thou* hast given me—this king among his fellows ! ' ”

The air was very sweet after the soft morning rain, as Esther took her way through the lanes to the Chenies. There was a beautiful greenness and leafiness everywhere ; the Midsummer foliage was yet in all its undimmed splendour, and the warm, fresh showers had washed away the dust and brightened up every little twig and spray on the bowery hedges, while the flowers sent forth their richest odours—the wild rose its own delicate, pure scent, and the honeysuckle flinging far and wide its blooming branches, its rich and luscious fragrance ; and the mosses wore again their vivid tints, and the graceful ferns bending low over the sweet white champions, and the young fronds just uncurling from their lowly nests were glittering as with diamond-drops in the golden sunshine that glinted through the trees and turned every rain-sparkle into dropping gold or quivering light lik-

gems. And then she came out upon a remote corner of the village-green, which ran into all sorts of queer nooks and shapes, like some map one sees of the shore of a curiously indented bay; and there was another scene quite as sweet, quite as poetic, though not perhaps so spiritually fair. It was bordered by wood and homesteads and crossed by a clear brook which near the high road expanded into a rush-fringed pool, and a flock of geese, snowy as swans, if not as majestic, were just taking to the water. Farmer Dobbs' sleek cattle were being driven to their pasture; two or three fat sheep bearing tinkling bells were feeding among the furze where the green sloped away into open common-land; and a flock of pigeons were wheeling about the old red-tiled roof of a venerable timbered barn, their silvery and pearl-grey wings shifting and shimmering like vanishing islets of pale brilliance against the soft, blue summer sky; and there were farmer Dobbs' ricks—shapely, substantial, and time-honoured ricks—ruddy in the sunshine, and representing so many hundreds of pounds ready to drop into the farmer's pockets whenever he should choose to open them for that purpose.

Behind lay the village, with its white cottages and its one "street," so called by sundry ambitious natives, its ivy-clad chimneys and thatched roofs gay with yellow stone-crop and crowns of flowering pink house-leek, and towering above them, and showing between the tall patriarchal elms, stood the grey tower of the church.

It had never seemed so fair to Esther as now when she felt that she must leave it. Leave it! Could it be? Why, yesterday at this hour she had thought, if she thought at all about it, that Chilcombe would be her home for many years, if God should spare her life. Leaving it, going away out of the country, had been the farthest idea from her imagination. Ah, how little we know what a day may bring forth! How little we reck when we greet its morning sunshine what joy or what grief may come to us ere its close! When earth is singing her early matins we are gay and careless as the birds that warble in her leafy choirs, and it may be that ere the *even-song*

"That which we have been can we be no more."

For a great joy or a great sorrow alike changes our inner selves, and be it brightness, or be it darkness, the world is never the same again. A few brief words, a trivial incident, a stranger's face coming and going, like the blossom of an hour, so often gives a colouring to one's whole life, casting one's existence as it were in an entirely new mould ; and the past and the future, though bridged over by the wonderful arch of circumstance, are as dissimilar as though they belonged to separate individuals.

Esther might have reached the Chenies more quickly if she had crossed the little brook, and skirted the pool ; but she wished to prolong her walk, for the more she thought about it the more she dreaded her coming interview, and the *tête-à-tête* which was inevitable. So she wandered on to the common, following a meandering path among the furze-bushes, which, however, brought her at last to the end of the lane that would take her to her destination ; but it was past seven when she walked up the drive and saw Cecil standing in the verandah in a perfect dazzle of scarlet geraniums.

"Come at last !" she cried, extending her hand. "Naughty girl, I did not know you could be unpunctual ; and I quite intended to ask Mrs. King to tell you to be sure to be here by six. What a magnificent evening after the rain ! We shall have fine weather now, the glass is going up ; it went up steadily all through the rain, which came just in time to save my transplanted Zinnias. What do you think of my Tom Thumbs and Stellas ? And here is Kate Anderson, rather a new thing, I believe. Are not the petals of a glorious, intense flame-colour ? I must have Mrs. King up to see my show ; but I cannot beat her at roses. It must be a case of soil rather than of culture, for I never saw such a Jules Margottin as she has in full bloom, and she confesses to taking small pains with it, except that she watches very closely for vermin, and that may be the cause of her success. Our things are not half syringed enough. Batson gets lazy, and does not care for my scoldings ; and as for Oswald, he always finds fault as if he did not mean it. Take off *your hat at once*, and do justice to our strawberries —"

cream, and then tell me all about Guise and my Lady Torrisdale."

It was not till tea was half over that Cecil said : " Esther, what is the matter with you? I fancied you looked grave and tired when you came in. Well, you have been in a grave house of late ; but you are absent and preoccupied as well as grave. I ask you if I shall come down and help you open school to-morrow morning, and you say, ' Yes, she told me so.' What is it all about ? "

Esther was silent. She had expected just such a question ; it was in the programme she had arranged as she walked up from the Slade. But now it came she found herself unprovided with a suitable rejoinder. How could she begin to tell the story that must be told before she and Cecil parted ?

" Esther, child ! " said Cecil, quite nervously for her, " do you know you are frightening me? Do you know how you look—hot, and cold, and pale, and red, and miserable, and foolish? Has my Lady Torrisdale been scaring away your senses, or has she vexed you with any of her sharp sayings? I know what a tongue she has. Why Fanny Tucker does not take her *congé* I cannot think. I would sooner sew my fingers to the bone, or wear out my knees scrubbing kitchen floors, than I would be a white nigger to an elderly, irrational, stupid, venomous Countess Dowager. I am glad she is no relation of mine."

" Fanny Tucker is tired of the life she leads," said Esther, quietly. " Besides, she wants to live in England, she is tired of France and Germany ; and Lady Torrisdale is going back, not to Boulogne, but to Paris, as soon as ever Mrs. Lester can be with Florence, and that will be sooner than was at first expected."

" Indeed ! Well, I must say Fanny has shown wonderful patience. How she has ever endured her patroness's whims and tempers so long is more than I can divine. That spiteful woman's greatest happiness is to humiliate people, to sting them, to see them pained ; she is a sort of human nettle, as I daresay you have found out ; and if from common prudence you try not to touch her, she touches you, *and thrusts herself in your face whether you will or not.*

I know her of old. Even aunt Laura, the meekest and most patient soul on earth, could not get on with her. There are some people who ought to have little Patmoses of their own. No. Patmos seems to imply celestial apocalypse; they ought rather to be made to live the life of Robinson Crusoe, without any Man Friday upon whom to vent their little spites. So Fanny Tucker really meditates a change?"

"She does indeed. She came to my room only last night to beg me to speak to you about it; she thought you might not object to help her."

"Of course I will help her to the best of my ability. I would do anything to help a girl to get away from such a dragon, and Fanny Tucker is really very nice. She is clever and very sensible, and she has shown what strength of mind she possesses, and what are her powers of patient endurance, by having borne so long a yoke that most girls would have flung aside impulsively—as I should have done, I must confess, even though I had had to take to selling lucifer-matches as a consequence. What does Fanny think of doing?"

Esther faltered a little, she could not state the naked fact at once, so she replied, it must be owned with a very suspicious appearance of hesitancy, "She said she would like to take such a situation as mine."

"Now, that is positive nonsense! Without any disrespect to you, my dear Esther, Fanny Tucker would be throwing herself away were she to undertake duties similar to your own. Why, she speaks French and German as well as English, and she is an elegant Italian scholar, and she paints and sketches like an artist. And that quiet grace of hers, that peculiar tone, so indicative of birth and breeding, fancy it brought into contact with our village mothers, to say nothing of their daughters, who are rather more boisterous upon occasion than we could wish them to be, even taking into account their station and its requirements."

"I told her all that; I pointed out to her the difference between her and myself. I spoke of the difficulties and annoyances of my position; I made the very worst

but it was all in vain, Miss Tucker was immoveable ; she intends to be a village schoolmistress."

"Well, if she is set upon it, I suppose she must have her way ; but I shall put before her very plainly all she will have to contend with, and if she continue in the same mind I suppose I must see what I can do for her. They want somebody at Frumpington, I know ; but that is a British school, and there is a ladies' committee, with which I would advise no sensible young woman to connect herself."

"Is it a very—a very disagreeable committee ?"

"No worse than other committees, which are always mistakes and nuisances. Be thankful, Esther, that you have to do with a private institution and not with a committee-governed school. No ; Frumpington will never do. I will write to my friend Mrs. Carden, she is always being mixed up with schools and schoolmistresses ; but I must talk to Fanny first. Lady Torrisdale drove her nearly crazy, I suspect, before she decided upon such a plan. Esther, what is it ? You keep turning pale, and gulping down some kind of emotion instead of your tea. Your fingers tremble and twitch—*there !* You are emptying your strawberry-hulls into the cream jug ! Never mind, cream is plentiful enough at the Chenies, and little Scamp may have a treat to celebrate your return. But say in plain English what you are wanting to say ; there is some difficulty about something or somebody. Does it concern yourself or Fanny Tucker ?"

"It concerns us both."

"That is strange ; one would think you had been getting into mischief together. Well, tell me at once what it is, and I will do my best to help you both."

"Fanny and I wish to exchange situations."

"Fanny and you ? I don't understand," said Miss Uffadyne, really nonplussed. "*What* is it you wish to exchange ?"

"Situations—places ! She wants to come here, and I wish to go with Lady Torrisdale."

For once in her life Cecil Uffadyne was silent because she had really nothing to say. She was too much astonished to

speaking, and vulgar expletives, to which an under-bred person would have resorted, were not in her way. Some spell seemed to have turned her into stone, for she sat with the teapot in her hand half-poised above her cup, her gaze riveted upon Esther, who looked pale and sad, but resolute and uncompromising as a fate. It was several minutes before she found breath or words. She finished pouring out her tea; she sweetened it and tasted it leisurely before she said, "Esther Kendall, I can only conclude that you are in a state of temporary insanity; you would not be so ill-mannered as to joke with me in this way?"

"Joke! Oh! no, indeed, Miss Uffadyne. Please let me go, and please take Fanny Tucker in my place."

"Please talk a little more rationally. Please to remember that you are a young woman and not a little child. If Miss Tucker has lost her senses, as she evidently has, that is no reason why you should follow her example."

"If you only would believe that I am quite in earnest!"

"In earnest to leave Chilcombe? In earnest to go nobody knows whither, with such a person as Lady Torrisdale?"

"Yes, I wish to go."

Esther's tone was getting dogged, and the dark look was coming over her face—a look that Cecil had never seen. She was being tried, and had been tried beyond her strength.

"Your reasons?" said Cecil, coldly and proudly.

"I wish for a change; I want to see the world. I should learn French then perfectly. I shall never speak it doing exercises and translations, and getting by heart scraps of dialogue and pages of vocabulary."

"You wish to leave tried friends, a happy home, prospects as safe as they can be in this world, to be the miserable white slave, the down-trodden bondswoman of a woman who is equally unfeeling and unprincipled, a selfish, ungenerous, what I call a *cruel* person, who will make you serve her turn, and demand from you every sacrifice, and probably leave you at last without money and without protection in some wretched hole or corner, where you may die and be buried among strangers, no one even knowing who you are. She will tax your strength to the utmost; she will ruin your

health and break your spirit, and then you will naturally fall ill, and she will straightway wash her hands of you. She is heartless enough for anything ; ask Florence. And all this you will brave for the sake of perfectly acquiring the French language, and seeing what French manners and fashions are like, and walking about on soil and among scenes not English. Child, you will do nothing so absurd, so completely suicidal ! The woman would be the death of you."

"No, she would not. If I could be tortured and trampled to death it would have happened long ago ; I had enough of that in Queen Square. Lady Torrisdale could not be worse than Mrs. Hellicar."

"Yes, she could, and she would too. Mrs. Hellicar, I should say, was excessively silly and weak as well as imperious and insulting, and one might manage her. Lady Torrisdale is not weak in the common acceptation of the word. Rank, position, and education, abused, make people worse instead of better."

"I should hold my own ; I am not Fanny Tucker."

"You would not do half as well as Fanny Tucker, and you are not going to try. Now, my dear Esther, whatever you may wish, and whatever you may say or think, I am not going to let you throw yourself away in this mad fashion. I cannot understand you in the least ; you are not at all like yourself. But go to France as my Lady Torrisdale's maid—she would never own you as *dame-de-compagnie*—*you will not !* If you are set on a trip to Paris, why, I will take you myself. I rather think I should enjoy it. I should like to see the old *Pension* again, and Madame Brillac. You shall have a holiday in September. Little Miss Chubb shall come for a fortnight and teach the girls. It will not be good for them to be dismissed, and you and I will be off to *La belle France* by way of Boulogne and Amiens, and we will even brave the long passage and come back by way of Dieppe, for dear old Rouen's sake. Even I cease to be practical, and grow mediæval, in Rouen. There, that will do, will it not, you perverse, tiresome thing ?"

"That would not be like living in France !"

“Esther, what does all this mean? You no more care about living in France than I do. I do not believe you really care to cross the Channel. You dare not look me in the face and tell me such a lie as that you are absolutely longing to leave Chilcombe and go abroad with Lady Torrisdale?”

And she took hold of both Esther's hands and drew her towards her, looking straight into her eyes with an honest, piercing, and reproachful gaze.

“Esther, I do not deserve to be so treated. Tell me the whole truth. What is it you really want to do, and *why* do you want to do it?”

“I have told you,” said Esther, trying to release herself; but Cecil's grasp was firm though light, and Esther felt tremulous and weak, poor child, as well she might. “Oh, let me go,” was all that she could say; “please let me go! I have nothing more to say.”

“Have you asked Lady Torrisdale to take you in Miss Tucker's stead?”

“No, not yet; but I think she will.”

“Fanny Tucker and you are a precious pair of simpletons, counting your chickens not only before they are hatched but before the eggs are laid! You must have a perfect genius for deductions. Why, you stupid girl! Lady Torrisdale will never consent to part with Fanny, in the first place. Fanny is experienced and well-seasoned, and takes to tyranny and insult as ducks take to water; and my lady knows it, and she will never let her victim go; by hook or by crook she will keep her, and if Fanny died to-night I am not at all sure that you would be the person chosen to replace her. It seemed to me—and Oswald thought the same thing—that she had taken a dislike to you. She seemed quite inclined to persecute you, I fancied, and also, to some extent, to persecute Florence for your sake. Only, grasping dowagers who love money can hardly afford to quarrel with nieces who boast such a rent-roll as does Miss Guise, of Little Guise, and the future wife of Mr. Uffadyne-Guise, of Guise Court! No. Lady Torrisdale will never quarrel with her own bread and butter, though she may long to bite the hands that

butter the dry crust. That, however, is not to the point. My own opinion is that nothing save a large bribe—and she would sell her soul for sovereigns and bank-notes—would induce her to take you to Paris in any capacity whatever. So if you are set upon Gallic experiences you had better advertise in the *Times*, for you will never go with Lady Torrisdale ! ”

Esther was unequal to replying, and Cecil still held her hands. She began to feel desperate—to wish an earthquake would happen, to wish somebody would come in, to wish she could faint away and become quite insensible—anything to relieve her from the searching rays of those clear brown eyes, and to free her wrists from that gentle yet relentless clasp.

“ Oh, Oswald, Oswald ! ” she said to herself, “ how cruel and thoughtless you have been ; how selfish, how dishonourable ! I fear I shall hate you. Ah, why did I let him drive me to Guise that day ? ”

Esther was so absorbed in her own momentarily increasing difficulties, and Cecil was so intently watching Esther, that neither of them heard footsteps without on the lawn ; but the next minute two tall figures darkened the verandah, and, looking up, the two women saw Oswald Uffadyne and Lancelot Digby. Esther could not tell whether she felt the more relieved or frightened ; at any rate, Cecil must cease her inquisition, and she would have time to collect her scattered senses, and think how it would be best to proceed. Would she ever be able to go without owning the truth to Miss Uffadyne ? And was she not the last person, except Florence herself, in whom she would wish to confide ? As Oswald entered, stepping through the French window, Esther felt inclined to jump up and run away as from her evil genius ; but, somehow, she could not tell why, Lancelot's presence secured a solace and a protection, a kind of omen of good, that would come some time or other out of all this miserable tangle of perplexity.

“ Dear me, Cecil, have you turned policeman ? ” was Oswald's greeting. Cecil let go Esther's hands, and turned to her brother and her guest with her most unamiable

expression ; just now she could have well dispensed with visitors ; she had not much patience, and suspense was very trying to a nature like hers ; she wanted to come to a conclusion with Esther at once, to solve the mystery, to read the riddle—for that both mystery and riddle existed she was positively certain—and any sort of interruption would have been unwelcome. Oswald resumed : “ I could not take so much as a minnow. I had scarcely a bite, though the weather was fine for fishing ; so I left the Underleigh waters and came back to Digby at Templemoor ; and I persuaded him to come in and ask you for a cup of tea ; he is on his way to Helmsley, of course. Sit down, Lance ; if you are not tired I am ; it is a long walk, even by the moor and the lanes, from Underleigh to Chilcombe.”

Cecil, feeling a little ashamed of her crossness, exerted herself to perform the duties of hospitality ; and she looked at Lancelot with her own frank expression, and gave him a cordial welcome.

“ It is all Oswald’s fault,” said Mr. Digby. “ I fear we—that is I, am an intruder.”

“ Not at all,” replied Cecil, earnestly ; “ I am always glad to see any of my brother’s friends ; but the truth was Miss Kendall and I were occupied—deeply absorbed—in an affair that interested us both, and I at least felt a moment’s impatience at our *tête-à-tête* being interrupted. Upon second thoughts I am glad you did arrive—we were both getting too much excited—and I really do not believe we should have reached any satisfactory conclusion had we talked till midnight.”

“ No ! nothing but dinner or a thunderstorm can stop women’s tongues when once they begin to argue,” replied Oswald himself, feeling a little uneasy. Cecil and Esther were certainly not on their usual terms, and his heart misgave him that he had something to do with the clearly unwonted state of affairs at the Chenies. Also the sight of Esther, whom he had scarcely hoped to see, set his impetuous heart beating ; he scarcely knew with what emotion, only he supposed it must be love, for he wanted to throw himself at her feet, to implore her to reconsider her decision, and to promise that

at least she would believe in his devotion to her and to her alone. He *must* tell her that his feeling for her was not, as she had declared, "a brief madness," but an abiding reality, a deep-seated principle of his heart, and that he would be faithful to her for ever and ever, even though she should continually spurn him. But when he looked round again the pale face, with its dark braids of hair, and its deep, lustrous eyes, had vanished. Esther had seized the first favourable moment to retire. She scarcely knew what she did; she only felt that she must get away, and, though conscious that her abrupt departure would appear singular, she thought it better to provoke remarks than to run the risk of finding herself altogether worsted. So she slipped out through the conservatory, and gained the kitchen garden, where was a door opening into a narrow lane or path leading straightway to the green. But Cecil saw her enter the conservatory, and comprehended that she had made her escape.

"Esther is gone home, I suppose," said Miss Uffadyne, a few minutes afterwards, when fresh tea was made, and the table generally rehabilitated.

"I hope we have not driven her away," replied Oswald, anxiously. "I supposed you were quite alone, Cecil."

"I should have been alone had I not sent for Esther to come up to tea; I knew she was coming back from Guise to-day. And really, Oswald, I wish I had not sent for her; only I suppose it would all have come out to-morrow, and when a thing has to be it had better be, and so get done with. What do you suppose Esther has been talking about?"

"How can I tell?" was Oswald's answer, gulping down a cup of very hot tea and scalding his throat.

If it had not been so dusk Cecil would have seen how guilty he looked. Lancelot cut his bread-and-butter into squares with the gravest expression of countenance. What was it that "must have come out to-morrow" if not to-day? both the young men wondered. Oswald had had some vague idea of flinging himself on his sister's compassion and winning her over to his side, taking her sympathies by storm, as it were; for Cecil he knew was very fond of Esther, "absurdly

fond ! ” had once been his own comment on the intimacy, and not so very fond of Florence as might have been expected.

In fact, Oswald knew that she had never cordially approved the engagement ; he remembered how, long ago, she had plainly told him that she wished he were not betrothed to Florence Guise. But, then, she had also frequently declared her horror of anything approaching to a *mésalliance* ; unequal marriages, she protested, never came to any good, and involved all concerned in them in continual dilemmas and annoyances. And much as she liked Esther, unwisely as she petted her, it was a question whether she would accept her as a sister ; and Cecil was not a person easily to be influenced or swayed, she would take her own stand, and nothing would dislodge her ; if she decided in Esther’s favour, she would go through fire and water for her, she would despise all comments, and do precisely the thing she chose ; but if, on the contrary, she were displeased—and it was far more likely than unlikely, Oswald felt, since a *mésalliance* in the way of friendship and a *mésalliance* which involves holy matrimony are essentially different—then she would immediately take most strenuous measures, and Esther would be whisked away to the ends of the earth, sent as a female missionary to China, or persuaded to emigrate to New Zealand. It never occurred to Mr. Oswald that Esther might whisk herself away, not only without Cecil’s interference, but in despite of that young lady’s authority. He was soon, however, taught better. As Oswald could not at all guess what his beloved one had been talking about, unless it had been about *himself*, a supposition he did not dare to hazard, Cecil considerately told him.

“ She is talking about going away. ”

“ Going away from Chilcombe ? ” And in his consternation Oswald scalded himself again. Cecil should not have made her tea so hot ; it was as bad as the filthy, boiling stuff at the railway-stations, her brother affirmed ; but then people should not tumble into tea at all hours, or they may get “ pot-luck ” more literally than is quite agreeable ! “ You don’t mean that she is going back to those dreadful people in Queen Square ? ”

"No ; she is going out of the country—to France, to Germany—*anywhere* ! She is bent upon getting away, I can see. *Why* is the mystery that puzzles me ; she has her reasons of course. She wishes to make me believe that she wants a change ! Now, that is all nonsense ; she is not that kind of girl. I never knew any one of her age so steady and so steadfast. She no more wants a change than I do ; yet she is wild to go to Paris with that ill-tempered, miserly Lady Torrisdale. I confess I cannot in the least understand it. It was the feeling of being baffled that made me so irritable, and I am afraid almost rude, when you came in, Mr. Digby. I beg your pardon sincerely !"

Mr. Digby quite understood, if his hostess did not. Oswald understood only too well : Esther was escaping from him. But that must not be ; she must not be suffered to take flight, though, silly girl ! did she think the English Channel a barrier that could not be overleaped ? Did she think going to Paris, or to Berlin, or to Yeddo even, would put her out of his reach ? Why, if she set off to help Bishop Colenso enlighten the Zulus, or join an expedition to explore the North-western passage, he would quickly follow her, and be at her feet ten times more devoted, and ten times more resolved than ever ! He wished Lancelot would finish his tea, and go away, that he might at once press Cecil into his service, and swear her to be faithful to his interests—his interests, that is, as he interpreted them, the lawful possession of Esther Kendall being the primary object on which indeed his whole future career would depend.

"Of course you will not let her go ?" he said eagerly. "Go with that she-dragon, too ! It is not to be thought of !"

"Certainly it is not ! I cannot think what put it into her head. I could beat that Fanny Tucker !"

"What has Miss Tucker to do with it ?"

"Cannot you see ?" and Cecil told how the two girls had schemed to make an exchange of situations. "Fanny wants a change, and I do not wonder at it. So she persuades Esther that she too needs variety, and the simplest way to secure it is by taking each other's place. There is one comfort. Lady Torrisdale has not been spoken to yet, and

though she cannot prevent Fanny from leaving her, she cannot be forced into accepting Esther as a companion. And I suppose Esther would not be crazy enough to go alone to France, and run the risk of finding a situation."

Oswald was by no means convinced but that she might be so mad. Lancelot was pretty sure that she would go at all costs, if she felt it her duty to put the sea between her and her unsanctioned lover. He soon fulfilled his friend's inhospitable wishes, and got up to leave, and Oswald did not press him to remain. He was longing to be alone with Cecil, for though Lancelot was in the secret, it would never answer to disclose it to her in the presence of another person. All depended upon the *prima-facie* view of the affair which Cecil would seize upon. She would either be sure, trusty, and fast ally, or else open, settled, uncompromising foe. And, again, all depended upon the way in which he put his case. He was nervously anxious to begin, burning to pour out his heart to Cecil; for he felt sure of winning her to his side, if only he could tell the tale *at once*. He scarcely waited for Lancelot to be gone. While the gate was yet on the swing, he burst out: "Cecil, you say you cannot understand Esther's sudden change of mood. I can enlighten you. I can tell you all about it now Digby is gone, though he knows: I told him last night."

Cecil listened like one in a dream; something had happened, that was clear. Esther was transformed into somebody else, and Oswald and young Digby knew all about it. What could it mean?

"Cecil, it is all my doing."

"Your doing?"

"Yes; do not look so black, there's a dear. Cecil, you have been my best friend ever since my mother told you on her death-bed to take care of your little brother—a couple of babies that we were, left alone in the world. If I had always allowed you to guide me, I should have been a happier as well as a better man. Now, I want you more than ever to befriend me, to help me, to be all that one's own and only sister alone can be."

"Dear Oswald, of course I will help you, if I can, if I

ought to help you ; and I am sure you would never ask me to countenance you in aught that was unworthy of our name ; but what has all this to do with Esther ? ”

“ Everything ! I love her. I have told her so.”

Cecil drew a long breath, and kept silence. Oswald waited almost in an agony for her reply. “ Well ? ” he said, sharply, when no answer came. “ Well, Cecil ? ”

“ I am afraid it is not well, Oswald. You are engaged to Florence : all but married to her.”

“ I find now that I never loved her.”

“ I always knew that you never did. I told you so at the first. It was my uncle’s doing ; he wished the marriage, and he exaggerated the cousinly affection between you and Flossy into downright love, such as leads, or ought to lead, to matrimony. You were willing to accept the shadow for the substance. You agreed to his proposals, and you fancied yourself a lover. Now you have found out your mistake.”

“ I have, long ago. I knew all that ; but I was content, for honour’s sake, for the sake of Florence herself, and for the true cousinly regard I bear her, to be faithful to the contract. I thought a man might be very happy with so fair and good a wife. I meant never to say a harsh word to her, to pet her always ; she was her poor father’s idol, you know. In short, I meant to marry her, and be to her the best of husbands.”

“ That you never could be. The *best* of husbands must have his wife in his very heart of hearts. She and she only must be essential to his happiness. I would not thank you for a husband who indulged me and caressed me, and lavished upon me all that I could desire, or imagine that I wanted, if, at the same time, he did not feel that I was the very sunshine of his life, his second self ; that without me all would be joyless and dark, the world itself a void and nothingness. If he had one thought he wished to keep from me, if he had one joy or one sorrow into which I could not enter, if I might not see down into the very depths of his soul as he should see into mine, I would rather he left me alone. There are very few true marriages in the world, I am afraid.”

"Mine with Florence Guise would be most untrue, for now I not only know how much was wanting in the affection I entertained, and still do entertain for her, but I feel for another all that I never felt for her. I love Esther Kendall more than life."

"And you have told her this?"

"Yes; I met her last night at the ruins, and I felt that I must speak. There are moments in one's life when one *cannot* be master of one's self."

"I do not know about that; but what did Esther say?"

"She said, and I really think she believed it, that I was mad. She called me unmanly, unkind, and asked with tears why I insulted her. She did not realise that I was in earnest. Cecil, what am I to do?"

"I do not know; I must think; you confound me. And Florence knows nothing of this?"

"No. Our engagement still stands, inasmuch as neither of us has said a word about dissolving it. But there has been an unexplained coldness between us for several months."

"Oswald, you have done very wrong. You should have broken with Florence entirely before you thought of exchanging vows with another girl. You were not free to propose to Esther. I do not wonder that she thought herself insulted; she always looked upon you as a married man. Poor girl! I quite understand her wanting to get away now. All her seeming obstinacy, her strangeness of behaviour, and her evident misery are explained. My poor, true-hearted Esther! How could you, Oswald?"

"How could I love such a girl, do you mean?"

"No; but how could you tell her that you loved her, circumstanced as you are and as she is as regards Florence?"

"But you will help me, Cecil? Say you will help me, and half my anxiety will be gone. You will receive Esther as your sister, your brother's beloved and honoured wife?"

"I cannot tell what I ought to say; I must think about it; I dare not be rash in so important a matter. And really you are in a most awkward position, Oswald. But this I promise you—I will do my very best to help you to be happy at the moment I see the surest way to go about it."

CHAPTER XL.

CECIL'S PROGRAMME.

THE next day Esther opened her school in due form, but Cecil did not come to help her, as she had proposed, and as had been the case previously, and Esther took this as a sign that Cecil was seriously displeased. And she could neither wonder nor blame, for she knew that her conduct was inexplicable, and liable to all sorts of miserable interpretations; looking at her behaviour in the most favourable light, it seemed to her that to every person in the world, except perhaps Fanny Tucker, she must appear guilty of ingratitude, fickleness, and wayward folly. Sacrifice would stand for love of change; duty would be counted as simple restlessness and instability; firmness would be taken for mere inconsiderate, head-long self-will. Oh, the lesson of life was very hard to Esther just now.

Moreover, as she knew Oswald to be at the Chenies, she went backwards and forwards that day in the greatest apprehension of meeting him. And when afternoon school was over, she made one of her little pupils who lived near trot by her side all the way home, rewarding her with a slice of bread well spread with the fresh preserve with which Mrs. King was at that moment busy. Perhaps the good lady's absorption in her red currants and raspberries, and her anxiety about her missing jelly-bag, which Patience declared must have been eaten by the pigs the day it was hung out to dry after washing, prevented her from noticing Esther's pale cheeks and heavy eyes, and the weary, hopeless expression of her countenance. But the farmer had remarked that she was dull, and that Guise air evidently did not suit her, and she replied that she had not slept well, and that her head was aching terribly. Which statement was no exaggeration, for she had scarcely closed her eyes all night, and had slept but poorly the night before, and the noise of the school seemed almost more than she could bear with equanimity.

After tea she went upstairs to her own room, and tried to

occupy herself with a French exercise ; it was high time to get on with the language, when she was so soon going where nothing else would be spoken, and with almost feverish determination she drew her little writing-table to the open window, and set her books in order, and commenced to study the exercise which was next in order. How long it seemed since she had written that last one on the compound tenses ! A whole lifetime seemed to have interposed between the last neatly written page, corrected by Cecil, and the next, blank, unwritten, and to be corrected by—*whom* ? Surely Cecil was too angry to correct any more French exercises for her. Surely a young person who acted in so unaccountable a way, and refused to give any credible reasons for her actions, could not expect the slightest favour from her friends !

“Ah,” said Esther to herself, as she leaned listlessly against the window-sill, “but this will teach me charity. I think I shall never again condemn any one from appearances ; when people seem to be going all wrong, and when all the world is crying shame upon them, I shall say, Perhaps it is not as it seems ; the motive may be quite pure though the action displeases. Only God sees the heart, only He knows all ; and what a comfort that He does know it ! And He takes into account everything. He knows, when we fall or fail, how strong was the temptation, how hard the struggle, and he looks pityingly not wrathfully on the poor, weak stumbler, and lifts him up again, and sets him on his feet, and tells him to go forward again in hope and with courage in a strength that is not his own. Oh, how good God is ! Whatever may betide let me always remember that, and feel it too. The other day I read, the tenderest hearts have limits to their mercy, ‘*God has none.*’ Oh, my God, let me be content to rest in Thy goodness, in Thy loving-kindness, which is better than life. Whatever may be the pain and trial in store for me, let me still trust in Thee, still rejoice in Thee, and praise Thee in the shadows as well as in the sunshine. Only let me do that which is right ; show me the straight path, and give me grace to tread in it !”

The gate clicked ; Esther looked down the garden-walk

and beheld Cecil coming up between the flowers. She, too, saw Esther at the window, and she called to her not to come down; they would have their talk upstairs. Esther thought she did not look at all angry—grave, certainly, even anxious, but no! not angry. Only was she come to torture her with fresh questions to which no adequate answers could be returned—to breathe, perhaps, suspicions which could not be dispelled, to give warnings which apparently would be despised? “Oh, my *Father*, bring me safe through it,” was her fervent prayer, as she opened her room door and stood at the stair-head to welcome Cecil.

An interview, especially a momentous one, is never what we suppose it will be; anticipated events always occur differently from that which we had planned and pictured to ourselves; and Esther now was not in the least prepared for the drama which was going to be played out between Cecil and herself. To her infinite surprise, Cecil kissed her affectionately as soon as ever they were shut up together in the bedroom, and, drawing Esther closely to her, she said, “My poor Esther! my dear child, I know all about it! You were quite right to keep the secret even from me; but you have been sadly tried. I tried you myself last night; but I am come this evening to make amends—if I can.”

Esther almost doubted the testimony of her senses;—*did* Cecil know? Had Mr. Oswald told her, and did he tell her all the truth—the exact truth? What had he said?

“Mr. Oswald has told you—that——”

“That he loves you, Esther; that no other woman can ever be his wife; and he has told me also that he has said as much to you.”

“Indeed, Miss Cecil, I could not help it. I was astonished almost to stupefaction; but when I quite understood what he was saying I refused to hear him any farther. I told him that I would never speak of it, that I would try to forget it, for of course I know it was only in a moment of infatuation that he spoke. But I am not a good one to keep secrets, and when I got back to the Court both Lady Torrisdale and Miss Guise perceived by my looks that *something* unusual had occurred, and I am afraid to think

what they thought about me. Miss Guise asked me to explain, but of course I could not. I could as soon have struck her on the spot as have told her the miserable, shameful truth."

"No; that is for Oswald to do. He must tell her; he must write to her."

"You do not mean that he persists in what he said?" asked Esther, aghast.

"Certainly he does. Surely, Esther, you did not think my brother meant to trifle with you? You could not imagine that he would so insult you?"

"He did insult me. He is as good as Florence's husband, and he made love to me."

"But he is *not* Florence's husband, or I grant you you might well feel insulted. But betrothal—such as theirs has been—is not marriage. The affair was *arranged*, you know, Esther. They were a couple of children together, Flossy and Oswald, and it pleased my uncle that the estates and property should not be disunited at his death. But it is over now; Oswald will never marry his cousin."

"Miss Uffadyne, I do not understand *you*."

"You know that I never cared about the engagement, but I could not urge Oswald to break it off contrary to his own judgment, and as it appeared contrary to his wishes. But now, when he feels and deplores his mistake, when he seeks his freedom, I am bound to do all I can to help him in the matter. Nay, I know what you would plead; you would say honour should bind him to his long-plighted word; but that is quite a mistake, Esther. A man cannot more deeply wrong a woman than by marrying her just because he will keep the word too rashly pledged, it may be. It is not honour but dishonour—the standing at the altar and uttering vows which he knows it will be difficult if not impossible to accomplish. A man has no right to barter himself even for his word's sake, and if it were my own case I would rather a thousand times he failed me on my marriage morn than made me his wife regretfully, as a mere matter of duty, a point of cold honour, or what the world calls such. I would rather suffer one sharp pang that might even re

body and soul asunder than endure the long, dull years of enforced affection, unloving fidelity, and painstaking kindnesses, meant to stand for something deeper and more satisfying."

"You are quite right, I suppose. It must be much better to discover that you have made such a mistake before marriage than after. But, oh, men should be careful; they should not go about breaking girls' hearts. I am very, very sorry for Mr. Oswald. I think he who commits the wrong is more to be pitied than she who is wronged. But is he not deceiving himself? It is my firm conviction that he does really love Miss Guise. Let him be silent, and I will be secret as the grave. I will even try to forget that he ever spoke such words to me."

"But, my dear, we neither of us wish you to forget. Oswald knows his own mind now, and you may depend upon it his love for you is no transitory, no mere ordinary passion. You must not be unkind to him, Esther."

"*Miss Uffadyne!*"

"You are naturally surprised; you did not suppose that I should sanction my brother's choice. But, my dear, I know him and I know you, and I think you will make him happy. Some people will call it a *mésalliance*, an unsuitable marriage—let them. There is no unsuitableness like utter diversity of mind and purpose, want of sympathy, and, still worse, want of love. Those marriages which to the world appear to fit in so nicely, to be so exactly suitable, are nearly always as unsuitable as they can be. It matters little what people say."

"Very little; but I am unsuitable, Miss Cecil, and it matters very much what I feel about myself. Nothing should make me marry a man who would be ashamed of me or of my connexions. I want to make the very best of my station in life, but I do not want to go out of it."

"Silly child! Oswald would never be ashamed of you; neither should I; and, as for your connections, you do not seem to have any besides the Hellicars, who would be easily kept at arm's length, since they are no blood relations and have no claim of any kind upon you. Of course I do not

want you to say you will marry Oswald immediately ; in a year or two will be quite time enough : he only wants your promise that presently, when it is decorous, when all things are duly arranged, you will listen to him."

"Only? He wants all that I have to give! But it never can be; for, to begin, I do not love him, and you say yourself that love is essential to a true, heaven-blessed marriage. No! I do not love Mr. Oswald in the least, and if I did love him, I should think it my duty never willingly to see him again. I am thankful that I am spared that torture; he is nothing to me, save as the brother of one kind friend and the affianced husband of another."

"Nonsense, child! you do not know your own heart. I thought you liked Oswald very much."

"So I did till he wounded me so sorely. Who could help liking him—so pleasant and so kind, so polished and so full of charming information? I always delighted in his conversation till the other night. But liking is not loving; one may like, even love a man in a certain sense, yet know nothing of that sentiment—that deep feeling for him which would be likely to end in marriage. I repeat it, Miss Cecil, I do not love Mr. Oswald!"

"Esther, your heroism does you honour; but you have no right to sacrifice Oswald if you choose to sacrifice yourself. You refuse to love him because you think he belongs to Florence; you will not even admit to yourself that you care for him because you feel it to be your duty, at all costs, and at all events, to put him out of your heart."

"He never was there; I cannot put out what never was in. I liked him, as I tell you—yes, liked him very much—but I never loved him, and I never can."

"I did not think you could be so hard, Esther. See, now, I ask you to make no promise to me, save that you will stay quietly here, and let events take their course. You wish to go abroad,—well, Oswald and I have talked it over, and we think it an excellent plan; I should like to see Paris again, and I have friends in Berlin. We will say nothing at present; but I will look out for your successor in the school, and Oswald shall not annoy you, you shall never see him

unless with your own consent. Then we will spend the winter in Paris, and afterwards go up the Rhine; you will be able to explore your favourite Heidelberg, and perhaps we may get into Switzerland; and I have always had a notion of seeing Rome and the Appenines. Then we shall come back to find Flossy happily married; and then—we will not say what *may* happen! What do you say to my programme, Esther?"

"I thank you with all my heart; I shall always love you for your wonderful goodness and kindness, but I cannot accept them under false pretences. You would take me abroad as your future or possible sister, and I could only go as plain Esther Kendall, who could never be Esther Uffadyne."

CHAPTER XLI.

"TALKING IT OVER."

MRS. KING came to the end of that day's preserving, and then it occurred to her to take a little walk, and to ask Esther to accompany her. Cecil had been gone some time, as Mrs. King well knew; for Patience, coming out of the apple-room with a fresh cargo of jars, met Miss Uffadyne in the passage, and opened the door for her, and immediately afterwards notified her departure to her mistress. So, about half-past eight, Mrs. King took off her great cooking-apron and washed her hands, and after giving Patience orders to attend at once to the men's supper, she went upstairs to look for Esther, and to persuade her to put aside her books and take half an hour's stroll along the Helmsley road. She tapped at Esther's door, and entered, to find the girl sitting, as usual, before the little table strewn with books, but with hands lying listlessly in her lap, and her whole attitude bespeaking weariness and dejection. "Ah!" thought the good woman to herself, "she feels dull coming back to the school and to our homely ways. It is rather hard upon her, poor thing, sitting in the Guise Court drawing-room, or teaing *with* Miss Uffadyne one day, and in our kitchen—which is

only a 'kitchen, comfortable as it is—the next ! I wish the gentry would leave her alone ; they try her too hardly, and it's thoughtless of them. It's always a trouble and a temptation living two separate lives. I remember how she was when she came home from the Chenies in May. The best thing I can do is to take no notice ; she has plenty of good sense, and she will soon come round again, as she did before. She *must* feel the difference, and I don't blame her ; I blame those who are inconsiderate enough to expose her to the trial."

"Esther, my dear, I am so tired with standing over that hot fire all day that I think I must have a little walk before supper, to get cool, and to get an appetite, you know. And I think a little fresh air will not do you any harm ; you should not try your eyes poring over books when the twilight comes. Suppose we go together ; the farmer has gone over to Mr. Clay's, and will not be back this hour. He's sure to get his bread and cheese there, so we need not hurry. What do you say, my dear ? "

Esther rose at once, but she seemed to be groping her way to the chest of drawers, on which lay her hat and mantle. And yet it was not at all dark, only a little dusk ; it was quite light still out of doors. She moved as if she were blind and were feeling her way.

"My dear, you are ill !" said Mrs. King, quickly.

"No ! thank you—only stupid !" But the voice was so hoarse and strange that it could be scarcely recognised for Esther's. Mrs. King was at her side in a moment, with her arms round her, pressing her to say what was the matter.

"Nothing," murmured Esther, wearily ; "at least, nothing that can be helped ! Oh, do let me sit down ! I do not think I can go out : I am so sorry." And she sank down on the side of the bed, trembling as she spoke.

Mrs. King made her lie down ; then she took a chair beside her, and, holding the girl's limp, cold hand in her own warm, kindly clasp, said, "Now, my dear, what is it ? Think I am your mother, and tell me all your trouble ; maybe I can help you out of it."

"No one can help me out of it ! There is a way out of some troubles, but none out of mine."

"Bless me, child ! you are talking like one of the trashy romances I used to read when I was a girl. You have not been *falling in love*, have you ?"

"No, indeed !" replied Esther, with strong emphasis. "Not that ! I have not, indeed !"

"Well, my dear, falling in love may be a weakness, but it is scarcely a crime. You need not speak in that indignant tone. Why we all of us fall in love once in our lives ; it comes as naturally as the measles, and it's better to have it young, I'm told. But perhaps some one has been falling in love with you ? That's awkward sometimes, and puts one into a fine quandary when one isn't used to it. I remember when Mark Burton—him that's the great grazier at Stannington now—went half crazy about me ; and I couldn't like him, because I'd got, without knowing it, to care for William, you see. Well, it troubled me very much, especially at first, and William had not spoken out then, though I knew pretty well how the land lay ; and love that isn't welcome is always a bore, if not a grief ; but still, one need not be utterly miserable about it, if one hasn't to reproach one's self for trying to win, out of vanity or coquetry, what one never really wanted. And I am sure that would never be your case, my dear ; so cheer up and tell me all about it. When one's got anything on one's mind telling is a wonderful relief ; it's medicine and cordial all in one. It's the troubles we *can't* tell that go nigh to kill us or make us mad. Well, my dear ?"

"I wish I knew if I ought to tell you. It would be such a comfort. I thought if Miss Uffadyne knew, she would advise me ; and now she knows, though I did not tell her, I am in greater difficulties than ever. Oh ! I wish I knew what to do ! but I am afraid I do know, and it is very, very hard !"

"Does this matter chiefly concern yourself or others ?"

"It concerns several others, but myself more than any one, I think ; I think I will tell you—Miss Cecil knows, and I am afraid Miss Guise will know ; why should I not tell you ? I should tell my mother if I had one."

"Try to think I am your mother. Your secret, whatever

it is, or whomsoever it may concern, is safe with me. But I am not sure that I do not guess it."

"Oh, I am sure you cannot! It is the most unlikely thing in the world that has happened."

"Still, unlikely events casts their shadows before them. There is a preface to most stories in real life, and some people are quick at catching hold of an idea. My dear, I think Mr. Oswald has been breaking faith with Miss Guise, and talking nonsense to you."

"If it were but nonsense! But how came you to guess anything of the kind?"

"I saw how he looked at you the other night, even while he was talking about Miss Guise; I had seen it once before, and that is why we wanted you not to be driven to Guise by him; we could trust you, the farmer and I; but we could not trust him, though it did not become us to say so."

"Oh! I wish I had done as you said. I wish the farmer had taken me!"

"Did that drive do the mischief, then?"

"It could not have done all the mischief; but I remember we talked very freely that day—of course, I do not mean unbecomingly. Mr. Oswald did not say one word that sounded wrong; but we talked familiarly, as if we were equals, and it was very pleasant till just before we reached the Court. He laid old of my hands, and made me tell him something, and I thought that was going too far. Also he spoke—perhaps not exactly with disrespect, but in a way I did not like—of Miss Guise. And I was glad when the journey was ended. I had a sort of instinct that things were going wrong. Still, when I met him at the ruins the night before last, and he asked to speak to me, it never occurred to me that he was going to say anything about myself. I thought he had some message to send Miss Guise. I knew that dear Mr. Guise mistrusted him, and I must say I mistrusted him myself on Florence's account. But that he would turn to me—say that I was his love! his queen!—that I must be his wife, or he would die a bachelor! I never dreamed of such a thing!"

"What did you say to Mr. Oswald?"

"I cannot remember now the exact words, but I told him

as well as I could how shocked and grieved I was. I would not listen to any explanation. I asked him how he *dared* to tell me that he loved me. And I told him that I did not love him, and never, never could !”

“And was that quite true, Esther ?”

“Quite !. Why, how *could* I love him in that way, Mrs. King, when I knew he was as good as married to Miss Guise ?”

“Thank God ! That simplifies matters very much. Mr. Oswald is a very taking young man, and I was sadly afraid ;—and you are sure he is nothing to you ? Let me know the very truth, my dear, then I shall be able to help you, or at least to counsel you so much more effectually.”

“He never was anything to me but Miss Guise’s betrothed lover. I cared for him *because* he was so very dear to her, and because I thought she was equally dear to him ; but now !—I am afraid it is wicked—but it is all I can do to keep from hating him. I cannot help despising him !”

“If you had loved him it would have been very terrible !”

“Indeed, yes ! And I might, I suppose, though I cannot imagine it. Such things do occur. But, Mrs. King, if it had been so—if he had been dearer than my life to me, I hope I should still have repelled him. I think I should have run away directly—gone back even to Queen Square rather than break my promise, rather than be treacherous to her, my first and best earthly friend. Of course, as it is, I must leave Chilcombe—I must get away as soon as possible.”

“My dear child !” exclaimed Mrs. King, in unconcealed dismay, “you must not think of such a thing ! Is Miss Uffadyne very angry, then ?”

“No ! that is the worst of it. I had rather she were ever so angry !” And then Esther went into particulars, and told her friend exactly what had transpired ; and she finished up with a despairing—“Oh, what am I to do ?”

“As concerns Mr. Oswald, my dear, you have only to be firm. Three people would be bitterly wronged did you agree to Miss Uffadyne’s proposition—yourself, your lover, and Miss Guise. But I do not see why you should be driven away ; the farmer will never hear of it, I am certain.”

“Oh ! you will not tell Mr. King ?”

“Certainly not, without your consent ; but if you talk of going away, he will have to know, surely. No, my dear, I should not think of telling him ; for, though there should be perfect confidence between man and wife, there are what I call ‘woman’s secrets,’ which must pass between woman and woman, and which I have no right to divulge even to him, as long as I am not myself in any way compromised. Some women have such a way of saying ‘only my husband’ where other women are concerned,—forgetting that he is not husband to any one else, and that he is a mere *man* to everybody besides. No, my dear ; I shall not tell the farmer one word till you say I may, for I do not see how eventually it can be kept from him. And if Mr. Oswald should go to Miss Guise and tell her the truth, and the engagement should be broken, I am afraid a good many people will get to know. I have no patience with the young man, that I have not ! Really, *men*—except just one here and there, like the farmer—are abominably selfish, thinking only of their own gratification, though it may be at the expense of the comfort and happiness of all around them, as in the present case. You see, Mr. Oswald ought to have held his tongue to you, whatever it might have cost him. I don’t say he ought to have married Miss Guise ; after he found out his mistake he couldn’t do her a greater wrong. But he was old enough to know his own mind when he entered into the engagement ; and there, I have no patience with him ! To relieve his own feelings he has done a fine heap of mischief, and made ever so many people miserable.”

“He *is* selfish,” cried Esther, vehemently, “cruel !—wicked !”

“No, my dear, we must not say he is wicked ; but he is lamentably weak, and really I think weakness on the whole works more evil than actual wickedness. One is naturally on one’s guard against a bad man, whilst against a merely weak man one does not think it necessary to be on the defence ; and the harm is done before one has time to think about it. To tell you the truth, I never thought the match *would come to anything*, for I’ve known Mr. Oswald man

and boy, and long ago I saw it would not do. I do not blame him so much that he found out the true state of his feelings, nor even that he took it into his head to fancy you. But I do blame him that he tried to be on with the new love before he was off with the old. It was unmanly, dishonourable, unprincipled. What he ought to have done is this—he should have gone straight to Miss Guise, and had it out with her, and come to a proper understanding. He should not have mentioned your name, or come near you ; and as soon as he was free he should have gone quite away for several years at least. Then when time had proved the sincerity of his attachment, and made it respectable, he might perhaps have been justified in speaking to you—though he is no great catch in my eyes, for all his handsome face and his fine fortune ! And then I don't think much good ever comes of marrying out of your proper station. Unequal matches seldom turn out well ; there are sure to be all sorts of annoyances and disappointments, and no end of cruel mortifications. I saw something of it in a young friend of my own ; very pretty she was, and quite the lady to look at, and she *married well*, as people say—that is, she married a man who claimed to be a gentleman by birth and position, and who had plenty of this world's goods. And for a while she was very happy, and looked down upon her old friends and on her own kindred—poor, foolish Maggie ! But her husband's people looked down upon her, and by-and-bye, when she was yearning for her own folk and her old home, she found that she was separated from them for ever ; she was not allowed to visit her relatives or to receive them in her own fine house ; and somehow her husband did not make allowances for her, and things went contrary, and he grew ashamed of her—I suppose when her beauty faded, as it did very early, for he neglected her, and she lived a sad, solitary life, I am told, cut off from her rightful station and denied admission into that which, in virtue of her husband's rights, she claimed. She had children, but she was not allowed to educate them ; she became very unhappy, and her spirits were so crushed she did not care to make any struggle to obtain her proper position, and soon she fell into

delicate health, and she was lost sight of long before she died—for she died young, poor Maggie, which was perhaps well for her. And very soon her husband made a second choice, and married a lady of his own rank, and poor, loving, underbred Maggie was forgotten. That is what an unequal match comes to, my dear, in nine cases out of ten, so that if you were free to accept Mr. Oswald's offer I should say, 'Look before you leap!'"

"Indeed, I should not be tempted were I morally free to listen to Mr. Oswald; I should refuse him under any circumstances. But do you think a girl may *never* marry a little above her station?"

"I do not say that. There is no rule without an exception; only one should be cautious, and not give way to foolish ambitions. And I don't say a young woman should not look up rather than look down, and I have heard it said it is good for the husband to be a step higher than the wife in mind, and stature, and position; but there is a wide difference between a step or even two, and half a dozen or more grades. Rather let us mate with our own kind, my dear; it will be all the better, and all the happier for us."

"But what am I to do now, Mrs. King? It seems to me that I must not, cannot stay here!"

"It seems to me that if anybody must go away, it should be Mr. Oswald. At any rate, Esther, you must do nothing rashly; put your trust in God, and wait and see what He will do for you. What was it you were saying about Lady Torrisdale?"

Esther explained, and Mrs. King grew quite angry. "No, no!" she answered, "I know something of my Lady Torrisdale, and if only half that is said about her be true, she is enough to drive a saint to desperation! I couldn't put up with her I know, and with all my heart I pity poor Miss Tucker, but I am not going to countenance her release at your expense. No! if the worst come to the worst we will find some better way than that; you are not going to be Lady Torrisdale's slave while I am Mary King, of the Slade Farm! And now come down and have a mouthful of supper, and try to forget Mr. Oswald and all his vagaries."

And as for Miss Cecil, I am surprised at her making the matter ten times worse for you than it was before—though I am not so very much surprised either. You can never count upon Miss Cecil doing as other people would do ; when they go right she is sure to go left ; if they toil up-hill it pleases her to run down ; it's just the way of her. She has often, I know, gone against Mr. Oswald when she had no call to, and now it pleases her to encourage him in what he ought to be made ashamed of. Come, let us go down and forget all about Uffadynes and Guises till to-morrow, then we'll see what is to be done."

But forgetting is not quite such easy work, it is just one of the things that cannot be done at will, and, of course, Esther was not likely to forget at present, while she kept full possession of her senses ; but the talk with Mrs. King had done her a world of good, and she felt comforted, she scarcely knew why, since things remained exactly as they were before. And she ate some supper, very much to Mrs. King's satisfaction, and was still downstairs when the farmer came home. Feeling unequal to general conversation she went away then, and after she was gone away Mr. King said, "I tell 'e what, mother, I don't like our Esther's looks ! I'm sure Guise air don't agree with her."

"No ! I do not think it does," replied his wife, demurely.

"Nor the Chenies neither ! She is best at the Slade, to my thinking."

"And to mine too, William. And we like to keep her, don't we ?"

"That we do ! The Lord sent her to us in the place of Elsie and Janie, I say. I wish we had a son for her to marry !"

"And so do I with all my heart."

CHAPTER XLII.

RELEASE.

"WHERE is Mr. Uffadyne ?" was Cecil's first question when *she* reached her home that evening, and Miss Amelia Matilda,

who happened to be the person interrogated, replied, "He is preambulating in the culinary department of the grounds, ma'am, observing the progress of vegetation."

"Why can't you say he is in the kitchen-garden looking at the cabbages?" snapped Cecil. "I wish you would not talk so much like an idiot, Smith! Fine words go no farther towards making a fine lady than fine clothes, remember that; and speak plain English to your mistress at least; you can do as you like with your fellow-servants, if indeed they will put up with your folly."

Miss Smith retired discomfited. It was very hard upon her when she was trying to improve her mind and form her taste, having lately, as she informed her friend Mrs. Lees, "taken to a course of elegant literature," to say nothing of having altered her patronymic from *Smith* to *Smyth*, cherishing, of course, the vulgar delusion that *y*'s are more aristocratic than *i*'s. About a final *e* she had not made up her mind, she had doubts as to whether its adoption would not entail a change of pronunciation, to her sensitive ears far from euphonious.

Cecil, indeed, found Oswald pacing the garden walks, smoking a cigar, and now and then switching at the espaliers, as if he had designs upon the unripened fruit. "Well?" he exclaimed, when his sister came within six yards of him.

"Take your cigar out of your mouth, Oswald. You know I never will talk to you while you smoke."

"Surely a man may smoke in the open air, in a kitchen-garden too!" replied Oswald, rather sulkily. To say the truth this was one of the several points on which Cecil was foolishly tyrannical; she never tolerated tobacco in any shape, not even under the blue vault of heaven. Woe to gardeners and grooms who indulged in surreptitious pipes, vainly hoping to lose the odour thereof before they were summoned by their imperious young mistress! But Oswald at once flung away his half-smoked cigar; he sent it flying into the midst of a little forest of gooseberry bushes, to the manifest disturbance of a huge brindled cat, which was doubtless composing the serenade he would presently address to his lady-love. "Now then," said the young gentleman, with a

certain savageness of tone and manner which seemed to indicate that he would not be trifled with, "out with it, Cecil! I am not in the mood for preamble to-night."

"Neither shall you have it. It is all of no use, Oswald. Esther cares no more for you than do those raspberry canes. You had better be reasonable, and think no more about it. You have made it awkward for us all, and I really do not know what we are to do."

"Give it up? Think no more about it? I tell you what it is, Cecil, you do not understand me; you think because I was cool in the other affair I shall be equally indifferent in the present case. Nothing of the kind! I love Esther Kendall, and I am determined to have her in spite of every obstacle; I will wait for her any length of time, I will endure any amount of opposition; though all the world puts itself in array against me, and derides me, and tries to circumvent me, I will triumph! In a matter so momentous, and which concerns myself alone, surely I have a right to make my own election?"

"Who said you had not? Do not be absurd, Oswald; raving like a silly boy will not do you any good. Of course you are free to marry whom you please when you have once freed yourself from your primary engagement. The world will not trouble itself about you; you are not King Cophetua, nor is Esther exactly a beggar-maid. I daresay if you chose to wed with a costermonger's daughter you might do it without provoking more than passing criticism; the world is far too busy at this juncture to concern itself for even the orthodox nine days about the erratic proceedings of private individuals. No one has a right to oppose you, and no one will—not even Florence, I am sure; but what is to be done when the girl says she does not love you in the least—not even like you *now*? You do not wish to marry her contrary to her own inclinations?"

"Certainly not. But cannot you see, Cecil, that Esther is bent on sacrificing herself for the sake of Florence? Her sense of honour, her generosity will not permit her to acknowledge even a prepossession in my favour. I admire *her* constancy, her heroism—it is all in keeping with her

delicate and noble nature, though I find it rather tantalizing at present ! ”

“Oswald, do not be angry with me, but I am almost certain there is neither constancy nor heroism in her conduct—that is, not in the way you mean—for I am convinced she would behave in just the same way if her affections had been involved. As it is, I fear she has no love whatever for you, never had, and never will have any ! And she is grieved for Florence, horrified at what she considers your perfidy, and outraged at being addressed by another woman’s affianced husband.”

“That was my stupid mistake ; I ought to have freed myself before I spoke to her. I ought to have gone to her a disengaged man, and then—*then* I might have had another answer.”

“I feel by no means assured of that. If you had heard her words, and looked into her face, you would not cherish much hope of ever being dear to her.”

“I do not expect her to fall into my arms as a ripe cherry might drop into my mouth. I like her all the better for her proud reticence, for her standing on her high prerogative of maidenhood.”

“High prerogative of fiddlesticks ! ” quoth Cecil, impatiently ; she always lost her temper when people indulged in sentiment. “Oswald ! you have not the perceptions of a gander—and ganders know less than geese, let me tell you ! If your affection had been returned Esther would have said, ‘Miss Cecil, I love your brother, but I will never see him again ; I will go quite away, and he must marry Florence. She is the most straightforward creature, and she would speak plainly, I am sure.’”

“But she might feel that if she admitted her regard that alone would bind me to her. The best women will tell lies even to mask their love, when they feel they have no other resource.”

“I very much doubt whether the best women ever tell lies, especially on such a subject ; and as to your being bound to her by the mere admission of her own feelings—why, look at *your position with Florence at this moment.*”

“Cecil, don’t be a Tartar !”

“I will not, if I can help it. I want you to marry Esther, and I never wanted you to marry Florence ; but I do not want you to be boyish and unreasonable, and I cannot but acknowledge that your behaviour to both has *not* been without reproach. Florence and Esther should never have been placed, even involuntarily, in the attitude of rivals.”

“I know it ; I confess my error. Cecil, what ought I to do ? Not, surely, as Esther says, keep silence, and continue my relations with Florence, as if nothing had happened ?”

“Oh, no ; you cannot do that. Esther will have it that you do not know your own mind — that this is a brief insanity ; that presently, if you be not encouraged, you will return to your old allegiance ; the delusion, the fever will pass away, and all will be as it was before.”

“*Never !* and now that I know the reality from the vision, the substance from the shadow, could I possibly return to the mere *convenances* of the past ? Could I content myself with a placid, passionless regard—a cold, calm, *cousinly* love, not so strong as the brotherly love I bear to you, Cecil ?”

“No, no ! And Esther *may* be won. But the first thing is to set yourself straight with Florence ; go to her and demand your freedom.”

“There will be no demand—the slightest hint will suffice. Florence would no more keep me against my own will than she would steal the Crown jewels. But, Cecil, it is not a pleasant task to undertake.”

“Certainly not ; but being necessary, the pleasantness or the unpleasantness becomes of very secondary importance. If you do not wish to be a traitor, a very dastard, you must see Florence, and that without delay.”

“I will see her to-morrow, and I would give more than half my possessions if it were to-morrow night, and the interview were over.”

And next day Oswald went to Guise Court, and found Florence alone in her own morning-room, where it was understood that Lady Torrisdale did not intrude. But Oswald was shown there without hesitation ; he had not seen Florence for nearly a fortnight, and he thought her looking

pale and delicate, and his heart smote him when he reflected that his neglect might have been the cause. Florence was cold in her manner, and though she took his hand and smiled, and said she was glad to see him, there was no lover's kiss exchanged between them. She manifestly held back, and Oswald had an uncomfortable reminiscence of Judas.

Very ill at ease they sat together, exchanging meaningless sentences on the beauty of the weather, on the abundant hay-harvest, and on the fragrance of stock, heliotrope, and sweet alyssum, which were all in bloom upon the balcony. How could he say it? How could he begin the conversation? He began to think that he must leave it unsaid, that he must go his way, and leave it to Florence to ask an explanation of his coolness, or proudly sentence him to dismissal. The latter would be best, since it would involve only a ready acquiescence; for Oswald, though muscularly brave, was morally a coward, and Florence, with right on her side, and her serene self-possession, held him sadly at disadvantage. Moreover, she was no coward herself; with all her gentleness and sweetness, that might be mistaken by indiscriminating souls for timidity and amiable passivity, she instinctively faced an evil the instant she perceived it. She saw that something was wrong; she had long felt the change in Oswald; ay! she had discerned it long before he suspected it himself; she knew that a crisis was impending, and she resolved that it should arrive without any loss of time. Anything was preferable to wearing suspense, and hateful, degrading suspicions; so, while Oswald was looking out gloomily seawards, she gave him one searching glance, then dropped her needlework and abruptly inquired, "what was the matter?"

"Do I look as if anything were the matter?" he asked, trying to feel collected.

"Looks are not of much consequence, Oswald; something is the matter, will you tell me what it is?"

He almost hated her for her plain spokenness and calmness; hastily he said to himself that she was heartless and apathetic—probably herself longing for freedom. But how to answer the question, for which she so quietly waited?—how

put into words which should neither be unkind nor offensive the announcement he had expressly come to make? He commenced with a sort of preface relative to their childish days, and to "boy and girl fancies," and to Mr. Guise's influence. She heard him without any signs of disapprobation, till he spoke of her father, questioning, as it seemed to her, the soundness of his judgment and the wisdom of his arrangements.

"Hush!" she said, quietly, but almost sternly, "say what you will touching ourselves alone, but spare my father. I think I understand you, Oswald, you regret the engagement formed between you and myself three years ago, and you would wish it broken?"

"Florence, I have always loved you; you have been always my very dear cousin, and I would not for the world pain you. Still, for your own sake, we ought clearly to understand each other."

"I do understand you perfectly, and I have no intention of speaking in enigmas; you wish your freedom, and I restore it to you. Henceforth we are merely cousins."

Man like, Oswald was inclined to quarrel, not with the boon itself, but with the manner in which it was conceded. He was disappointed, he had expected reproaches, mute despair, and utter abandonment of sorrow. She had never really loved him then! Strange to say, this supposition, which ought to have been an immense relief, vexed him exceedingly. How little he knew Florence Guise! How could he dream that gentlest creatures can be the proudest, that the softest and most yielding of women can stand upon their dignity, nor waver for an instant! How could he guess what it cost Florence to sit calmly there, facing him, showing by no gesture, telling by no faltering tone, how much she suffered! He thought her cold and hard, and he congratulated himself upon the discovery of his mistake ere it was too late.

"It is so much better," continued Oswald, "that we should know now we have only loved as cousins. What would it have been had we only known it when release was impossible?"

“Oswald!” She was deadly pale, and her hands trembled a little, but her voice was clear and distinct. “I will not lend myself to a falsehood; I have *not* loved you as my cousin only, I have loved you as the man to whom I owed all tenderness, all devotion, all fidelity! But that is past. Still I wish you to know that the love *was* there; it was there in all its force and vitality till you killed it.”

“That sounds reproachful, Florence.”

“I do not mean to reproach you, though some might think I had full right to do so. Only, next time you ask a woman to marry you, to give you all the treasures of her maiden heart, be sure that you really wish for what you ask. Uncertainty on such points is neither desirable nor *manly*!”

“You speak bitterly, Florence, but I do not wonder. I see I have lost not only your love, but your esteem.”

“You have! Worlds would not tempt me to marry you now! I could not be the wife of a man whom I could never reverence; besides, I could never trust you. Oswald, I know what has occurred!”

He started. Had Esther changed her mind, and told all to Florence? “You know?” he said, hesitatingly. “What do you know?”

“I know that you love, or that you think you love, Esther Kendall.”

“She has told you so?”

“She has told me nothing, but I know you met her at the ruins that last evening she was at Guise; and she came home from her walk in a perfect agony of distress. I questioned her next morning, but all I could gain from her was an assurance that she was true to me—steadfast to some promise she had given my dear father.”

“And she is true to you,” burst out Oswald. “She repelled me with scorn; she would not listen to one word I had to say. In short, she resented my expressions as fully as if I had been indeed your husband.”

“Thank God!” said Florence, almost passionately. “One load is taken from my mind; there is one creature in the world who *will still* be true to me. Treachery from Esther *would have been* very hard to bear. I was wrong to doubt

her even for a moment ; but I did not doubt her, I was only vexed at her want of candour, as I considered her reserve. I was terribly perplexed ; I see now that she could not have acted otherwise."

"Her conduct has been beyond all praise," interrupted Oswald : "I must say it, though it has mortified and humiliated me, and sorely disappointed me too. I did not expect that she would consent to any engagement while ours still stood, but I thought she might have owned that she cared a little—that she might, if things were otherwise, have received my proposals favourably. Of course I did not seek any pledge from her. I should not have really engaged myself while you still held my promise."

"Thank you ; you are very kind. Well, now the barrier of the old engagement is no more ; you are as free as if such a person as Florence Guise had never existed, and you can propose to any girl you please. I cannot say I wish you success with Esther, for I do not think you would ever make her happy."

"Florence, tell me one thing, that you do not despise me."

"I will try not, for my own sake, for it must be a bitter pain to despise what one has dearly loved—and I *did* love you, or I had never promised to become your wife."

"And—you do not suffer ? I have not made life wretched to you ?"

"You have no right to ask me such a question," she replied, rising indignantly. "Confidence between us two is over. Be assured that I can bear my lot, bravely and contentedly. Our love is dead—quite cold and dead. I will bury it out of my sight, and presently green grass and flowers will spring over its grave, and I shall never regret the course that things have taken. Now you will please excuse me. I do not think we have any more to say."

"She does not care," said Oswald confidently to himself as he stood alone before the open window. "I thought she would not ! I always knew it would be so, and of course I am very glad ; some day we shall all be very happy together."

But Oswald's heart did not say this, only his lips. He *had* seen the white face and the one look of mute anguish

ere she left the room, and in spite of every endeavour he felt guilty and ashamed. That he had cut a very sorry figure during the interview he could not but perceive.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE TERRACE GARDEN.

SUNDAY came and Esther had seen nothing of Cecil, though one or two questions had arisen that ought to have been referred to her. In a former aspect of affairs Esther would at once have gone up to the Chenies to consult her, but now such a course was altogether impossible; the Chenies might have been as distant as the Land's End as far as Esther was concerned, though she wondered that in some way, either personally or by letter, Cecil had not communicated with her since her momentous visit to the Slade. All the Saturday afternoon and evening she had expected her, and she had sat in her own room, alternately busy with her books and with her needlework, yet all the while anxiously watching the gate, and straining her eyes along the lane towards the turning which led off to the common. She began to assure herself that Cecil was seriously offended and resented her rejection of Oswald's suit and of her own kind though imprudent proposals. She was getting impatient to decide something, and she had made up her mind to write to Fanny Tucker without further delay, when, happening to declare her intention to Mrs. King, she was begged not to take any steps in the matter till after the Sabbath was passed. "Let the day of rest go by," said Mrs. King; "let us put it all aside till the new working week comes in, we shall get strength and perhaps wisdom, and surely God will guide us and show us what to do if we humbly ask His help. Let us above all things avoid rash haste and impulsive actions; people so often do things in the heat of the moment that they bitterly repent at their leisure. So do not write to Miss Tucker, do not come to any conclusion; just tell the good Lord all about it, *and wait His pleasure.*"

But when Sunday morning came sunny and beautiful, Esther felt too unwell to go to church ; she had one of her bad headaches, and instead of worshipping in the great congregation she was fain to sit quietly in her own chamber, and after the bells had ceased ringing read the service over by herself. She did not read much of it, however ; her eyes were too heavy and her thoughts too busy, and doubtless her time was spent quite as profitably as if she had followed the morning service from its commencement to its close, for she remembered her friend's counsel and "told the Lord all about it," and she was strengthened and comforted, and her heart was lighter than it had been since the miserable evening of Oswald's declaration, though her load of care, and regret, and anxiety was really just as heavy as before. But Esther, like many another Christian, learned in her hour of trouble the fulness of the promise, "Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee."

When Mr. and Mrs. King came home her headache was nearly gone, and after dinner she proposed walking to Helmsley church, for the afternoon was lovely and it was yet quite early, and the service at Helmsley did not begin till three o'clock. Mrs. King was glad that she should go, for she thought the little change of scene would do her good ; "And you know," she said, "it will only be the fulfilment of your promise to Miss Digby. If she meet you coming out of church and ask you to go with her to the Manor House, I hope you will not refuse."

"Indeed," said Esther, "I quite appreciate Miss Digby's kindness, but I am not in spirits just now to talk to strangers."

"Nonsense, my dear. There is nothing more unwise than nursing up your griefs—petting them, as it were, and making the most of them. Brooding over your unhappiness will not do one atom of good, else I would say, 'Brood away, and I will help you.' But the calmer your mind gets the more likely you will be to decide prudently when the time for decision comes."

"It must come very soon. I cannot go on in this strange way, not knowing my own footing nor in the least foreseeing *my destiny*."

“My dear, God tries us sometimes, especially by suspense. He will have us wait patiently till He pleases to show us the right way. Do you not remember what you read to me in that little poetry book of Miss Cecil’s?—‘Well waited is well done.’ Perhaps the Lord is giving you the very kind of discipline you most need. Such as you would rather do battle with the raging tempest than lie becalmed upon any sea; but it must be as God wills, not as we wish. Try to give up all your wishes to His will, my dear. Keep quiet, and when you feel inclined to despond just lift your heart and say, ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord.’ And now go and get ready. It will be very good for you to go among people who are quite unconnected with your trouble.”

So once more Esther took her way through Helmsley wood, and once more she sat on the gnarled oak-root by the rippling, chattering brooklet. It was only a month, scarcely so long, since she had been there last, indulging in her “little Ellie” meditations, and choosing for herself the lover who some day should come to woo and win and claim her for his own. And a lover had appeared—a lover with gold and broad lands of his own, handsome and gifted, and, as it would seem, passionately devoted to her, but the last man in the world whom she would have wished to come forward suing for her hand and heart. The proposals of ten Dick Hellicars would have been preferable, since she had only firmly to reject them. She scarcely felt like the same Esther Kendall who had gone to the Manor House so light-hearted, so contented, so thankful for her lot only four little weeks before. The golden radiance had faded again, and all was grey and sad. The bright afternoon seemed almost to mock her dull and weary pain. Mr. Guise had told her that we colour our lives very much as we choose, that our own self-will and wrongdoing turn the gold to grey oftentimes, and that by patience and love, and calm trust and perseverance in the right, the grey may be changed to gold, purer and more effulgent than that of the careless days of prosperity. And in her mind rang the words Mrs. King had spoken—“Well waited is well done,” and “Cast thy burden upon the Lord.” And so she said to herself:—“The grey times, perhaps, may do us

the most good after all. Too much sunshine is hurtful to souls as well as to trees and flowers. I have heard the farmer rejoice over some grey days when the sun never came out and there were continual droppings of rain—‘a gracious rain,’ I remember he called it. Ah, one may learn a great deal from nature. The grey time may be the growing time in every way. Both mind and soul may progress in stature without the brightness that was so enjoyable. Then there is the clear shining after the rain. God does not will the unhappiness of any of His creatures, though in His love and wisdom He may try them, yes, try them in the fire of affliction, in order that the grey dross may be consumed and only the pure gold be left. Ah, that is a new way of putting it—a new interpretation of my favourite grey and gold theory.”

The tinkling of the little bell in the mossy turret warned Esther that she must not loiter, so she rose and went on her way, and soon found herself in the old Norman church, with its low-browed chancel, and its green gloom deeper now than in the bright April morning. She looked towards the squire’s pew, and saw that Edith was there, with several of her little brothers and sisters ; then she tried to compose her mind and forget all but the sacred service in which she was about to join. The Psalm for “Evening Prayer” was the 27th ; and Esther felt as if it had been chosen on her account, though she knew, of course, that it came in the regular order. In the homely Prayer-book version she read :—“Put thou thy trust in the Lord, and be doing good ;” “Delight thou in the Lord, and He shall give thee thy heart’s desire ;” “Commit thy way unto the Lord, and put thy trust in Him, and He shall bring it to pass ; He shall make thy righteousness as clear as the light and thy just dealing as the noon-day. Hold thou still on the Lord, and abide patiently upon Him.”

The sermon was short and simple, but it went home to Esther’s heart ; the text was taken from the Psalm they had already read, only it was now repeated in the Bible words :—“Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him.” Though it was rather the text than the sermon that impressed her so

deeply, it seemed the answer to all her anxious questionings, the reply to all her doubts, the command which she must unhesitatingly obey. It was the rest she needed, *rest in the Lord!* No other rest was safe; it might be delusive, or the result of apathy or mere slothfulness, but the "rest in the Lord" was joy and peace, and through the grey veil of outward circumstance shone out the golden radiance of heaven's own sunshine. The concluding hymn was sung, "Sun of my soul," and then the Benediction was pronounced, and the small congregation separated; not, however, before Esther had once more read the inscription on Alice Stapleton's tablet, "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God."

In the porch Edith joined her, evidently well pleased to see her, and she at once claimed the fulfilment of the promise. Esther must come and take tea, and sing some hymns with them, and some of them would see her through the wood before it grew dark, or rather dusk, for there was no real darkness now in the short sweet summer nights.

Tea was not quite ready when they reached the house, and Hughy made some demands upon his sister, so Edith said:—

"Would you like to see what flowers we have, Miss Kendall? We have nothing to boast of, only some very rare bulbs that my brother had sent to him from the Cape. He is fond of horticulture, or rather he would be if he had money to spend upon it. Lettice, will you take Miss Kendall to the old Terrace-garden? and be sure to show her the view." Lettice, a small grave maiden of seven, put out her chubby hand, and willingly promised to do the honours. Children were never shy with Esther; they came to her under almost any circumstances.

The old "Terrace-garden" had once been most sedulously kept; it was now sadly neglected, though there were patches here and there that told of careful cultivation. Esther wondered which of Edith's brothers was "fond of horticulture." The view was indeed splendid, and the afternoon was peculiarly clear, all the foreground being flowers and leafy green, then slopes of wood, with a purple light upon

them, then rocky heights, and between them the bright shining sea and the wet, golden sands glittering in the sunlight.

"Is it not pretty?" said Lettice, waiting for evidently expected praise. "We went to the sea-side once: I wish we might go again, but it costs money, Edie says. I should like to have heaps and heaps of money, wouldn't you? Have you a great deal of money?"

"I have very little, dear; and what I have I work for."

"I wouldn't mind working if I might have money for my own. I would take all of us to the sea-side to-morrow, and mamma should go to London to see the great doctor who lives there, and cures everybody—only he charges so much! And Edie should have a new silk dress, just the colour of that nemophila; and Rupert should have the chestnut horse he wanted last winter; and Cuddie should have a gun, and Lance—oh! Lance should have hundreds of books, all he would like to have, and a room to put them in, where he could write and make his fine poetry. It is *real* poetry, Edie says so, Miss Kendall."

"What is that you are saying, puss?" said a voice close at hand, and there stood Lancelot Digby; and gravely, but with a certain welcome cordiality, he put out his hand. Yes, he looked very grave—a little stern, Esther thought, but even as she thought so there was the beautiful smile again, and all the sadness and the look of weariness passed away.

"I am so glad you are come, Miss Kendall," he said, after they had walked the length of one of the grassy terraces in silence. "I think you and Edith will understand each other; but I heard from Miss Uffadyne the other evening that you were thinking of going abroad?"

Esther murmured some kind of assent. She felt herself turning scarlet to the tips of her fingers. How much did he know of what had been transpiring? She feared he knew all, and perhaps, as Oswald's friend, he would plead his cause. Strange to say, she dreaded that as the climax of *her misfortunes*.

"I have something to say to you, please, if I may presume," continued Lancelot. "I had a letter yesterday from

an old friend in Paris, and—and I think in short she would be kinder to you, and suit you better, than Lady Torrisdale. Ah ! there is the tea-bell."

So then he was not going to take Oswald's part, and she felt comforted at once. How very kind he was !

CHAPTER XLIV.

A NEW POEM.

THE Digby family were assembled in full force that Sunday evening ; they were every one present when Esther and Lancelot and little Lettice came in to tea. The squire nodded her a careless "How d'ye do?" without having the smallest idea who she really was ; Rupert claimed her as an old acquaintance, and Cuddie scowled at her from under dark, overhanging brows, with a half-contemptuous, half-defiant expression. The young man was not amiable in the bosom of his family ; he reserved all his brilliance and all his good temper for his friend Red Giles, for Mr. Fuggles, a Stanning-not horse-trainer, or for anybody who loafed about, gun in hand, or fishing-rod on shoulder, with all sorts of dogs following at his heels—provided he was allowed always the post of honour as Mr. Cuthbert Digby of the Grange.

Esther did not like the large full eyes that stared at her so rudely ; the long, gaunt face, the high cheek-bones, the lank, dark hair, and the spider-like arms placed at a most undue angle from his shoulders, did not impress her favourably. There was nothing of the gentleman in his appearance, neither were his habits such as graced the ancient name of Digby ; the neighbourhood did not like him, and though familiar with his inferiors, as Lancelot and Rupert never were and never could be, he was the least popular of the squire's three eldest sons. The truth is, Cuddie was a bully, a braggart, and a sneak ! he was an adept at lying ; he despised women ; and he drank more strong ale than was good for his constitution. There was no time in Cuddie's life, from sixteen and upwards, when a course of treatment

in a hydropathic establishment would not have been highly beneficial.

Edith made tea from a huge battered teapot that had evidently done good service in its day. Rose, a stout girl of ten, the first copy of the second edition of current Digbys, nursed the year-old baby in right motherly fashion, keeping it on her left arm, and dandling it judiciously, while she took her own tea under difficulties. Lettice presided over Alfy and Eddy, the twins, and Charley and Hughy, who were all that small maiden's juniors; while Roley, the next in age to Rose, swallowed huge blocks of thick bread-and-butter, and gulped down weak, sugarless tea, with a surprising celerity, not speaking a single word, but regarding Esther with a stupid, unflinching stare, as if she were some marvellous phenomenon.

Upon a sofa near the head of the table languidly reclined Mrs. Digby. She had once been handsome, and it was said that she had had fascinating manners in the days of her youth, when the squire succumbed to her attractions; but the trials of maternity, indolent habits, and self-indulgence, had robbed her of pretty nearly all the beauty and quite all the graces that she had ever boasted. Her health was her favourite topic of conversation, and to question her extreme delicacy, or to hint at any possibility of exertion, was to offend her immediately. A slight upon her family, an adverse criticism on her children, a satire on her husband, might be forgiven, but never the smallest infringement of her privileges and attributes as a person in weak health. That was the unpardonable sin at Helmsley Grange, and every one in the house had committed it, save Lancelot, Edith, and the baby, who, however, was only waiting his opportunity. Even Hughy had contributed his mite to the general impressions; for one day, when Mrs. Digby came down to dinner, declaring that she could not touch the boiled beef and suet dumplings and cabbages which were that day's *menu*—she had had a bad night, and she had not the least appetite, and *she really* felt worse than usual—Master Hughy hastily set down his mug, and in a loud voice asserted, "'Oo not worse, *mamma*! 'oo velly well! 'oo eat all the bixits, and the gapes,

and drint all the serry in the 'canter! 'Oo not hungry now!"

This evening Mrs. Digby was very poorly indeed, and though rather inclined to resent Esther's appearance at the family board, she was secretly gratified, because she would have an opportunity of giving a *catalogue raisonnée* of her ailments to one to whom the story would come with at least the charm of freshness. Esther was seated at Edith's right hand, so that she was not very far removed from Mrs. Digby and her sofa; Lancelot sat exactly opposite Esther, ministering to the creature comforts of his stepmother with a most commendable patience.

Mrs. Digby languidly sipped her tea, and nibbled like a mouse at a tiny strip of delicate cake; her hands were very white and sleek, but they had not the wasted and diaphanous appearance which so generally accompanies confirmed indisposition, and her face, though pale, did not convey the idea of suffering or decay. For a while there was nothing like conversation, for all Edith's energies were concentrated on the teapot, while the children kept up constant demands for more tea, more milk, more bread-and-butter, and more plum-loaf! The squire read his *Field* diligently, Rupert was absorbed in yesterday's *Times*, and Cuddie was in his normal condition—that is to say, in a state of chronic sulks. As for Lancelot he had enough to do, presiding over the plum-loaf, and responding to the requirements of Mrs. Digby.

At last that lady's voice was heard, saying, "I hope some one is taking care of Miss Kendall. Really, Edith, you might pay a little more attention to your guest. Why, she absolutely has on her plate a piece of the children's plum-loaf. Don't eat it, Miss Kendall; it is horribly coarse and indigestible; but everybody here devours like an ostrich."

The cake was perfectly plain, but, of its kind, good; it was only ordinary dough, made up with a few raisins, a little coarse sugar, and a few, a very few, strips of candied peel; it was emphatically a plum-loaf; but it suited the palates of the hungry young Digbys, and was among the most popular of their Sunday institutions. Esther was going to reply, and say something civil about the cake, when Cuddie dropped his

spoon, which he was trying to balance on his thumb, and it fell with a tremendous clatter upon his cup and saucer, setting even Esther's nerves ajar, but startling Mrs. Digby into a mild attack of hysterics.

Mr. Digby looked up as he heard some one sobbing and gasping, but he only gave his broad shoulders an impatient shrug, and buried his head again in the folds of his paper. Rupert rose abruptly, and carried himself off, cup and *Times* in hand, on to the lawn, and the children began to quarrel over a handful of salad, which one of them had grown in his own garden. It was some time before order was restored, and then the juveniles were hastily dismissed, each one with a goodly slice of the plum-loaf, and an injunction to be quiet and not disturb mamma. Without a word, or a look at his wife, Mr. Digby walked away, and Cuddie sat still, glowering at the group round the sofa, and brooding apparently over his wrongs, which, according to his own account, were innumerable and unbearable.

At last Mrs. Digby wiped her eyes, sighed deeply, smiled faintly, settled herself on her cushions, and demanded a fresh cup of tea.

"I am such a poor creature!" she said, apologetically, to Esther. "Pray excuse me; I have spoilt your tea!"

"A poor *fool*!" muttered Cuddie, savagely, his undertone being, however, quite audible.

No one took any notice of this polite remark, and after awhile he sauntered away to the stables to enjoy the congenial society of Bill Scattergood, a young gentleman who had somehow come to be a sort of hanger-on at the Grange, professing to help Peter with the cattle, or to do anything that there was for him to do. He did not live in the house, and he had no wages, and it was generally believed that he was a son of Red Giles, who on his part, however, claimed with him a more distant consanguinity, and spoke of him as "a sort o' nevvvy."

"You are better now, mamma?" said Edith, as she handed the cup, and found that only herself, with Esther and Lancelot, remained.

"Yes, I am better; but these attacks do me so much

harm, and I shall not get over it for hours, and I shall have no sleep to-night again. Ah! you young people in rude health, and in all the flush of youth, little think what it is to be laid aside year after year, having no enjoyment in life, and continually wishing it were over. I am in that weak state, Miss Kendall, that I think every summer will be my last; my heart is affected, and so are my lungs, I am sure, though Dr. Dixon says it is no such thing, as if one were not the best judge of one's own feelings, and couldn't tell all about one's own lungs, and heart, and all the rest of it. But I suffer most with my nerves, Miss Kendall; tongue cannot tell what I endure when my nerves are really shaken, and I assure you a very little thing does shake them—throws them off the balance, you know. Now that dreadful noise a little while ago only startled the others, but it thrilled my whole system; it is such a poor, tried, shattered, undermined system, Miss Kendall. Are you nervous?"

"Not often, I am thankful to say; I know just enough of nervousness to dread knowing more about it, and enough to sympathise with people who really suffer from nervous malady."

This was the right way to Mrs. Digby's heart, and she took to Esther amazingly, and forthwith favoured her with a long and detailed history of all the illnesses she had had since her marriage, viz., seven confinements, one scarlet fever of the most malignant kind, a quinsy, two attacks of acute bronchitis, and neuralgia *ad libitum*. No wonder the "system" was shaken considerably. Esther began to think that Mrs. Digby's "system" was about equivalent to Mrs. Hellicar's "frame," and she was actually constrained in her own mind to compare the experiences of the two, and came very quickly to the conclusion that Mrs. Digby was only a more refined and elegant edition of the type of woman which Mrs. Hellicar represented. She went on so long that Esther almost forgot to listen, and Edith, who knew when every symptom was due, and the precise period when a crisis might be expected, stole away, and left Esther to dream and meditate, with that soft, plaintive voice murmuring in her ears, like the quiet ripple of a stream which means nothing till

you begin to think what it is saying. Lancelot had gone off, as in duty bound, as soon as ever his step-mother commenced her narration. She had told the same story so often that she forgot her audience was not commonly composed of doctors and nurses, neither did it strike her that what might probably interest matrons was not so interesting to young girls—the very reverse, indeed, if a young man happened to be within ear-shot; and Mrs. Digby was not too particular when it was only her step-sons who were concerned. Ladies who talk much about their ailments are certain to have their sense of delicacy blunted in course of time. With perfect innocence in their heart they say things which are embarrassing and painful even to bystanders, while they disgust people with their stupid egotism, and weary even relations and sympathising friends. Talking about one's self, except upon occasion, is always a grand mistake; but such talking assumes its most objectionable form when it degenerates into long details of "symptoms," highly coloured descriptions of "sensations," and lucid sketches of attacks and remedies. And the worst of it is that such people are always repeating themselves, and have no idea of their own incessant and most burdensome tautology.

If Mrs. Digby had once before told the story she was telling now to Esther I suppose she had told it five hundred times, only that of course it grew and grew as her experiences were augmented. Rupert used to say she would repeat the tale to the first beggar-woman she encountered rather than keep utter silence on the subject; and I believe he was so far right, inasmuch as it would have been a struggle to speak five words to a beggar-woman without a passing allusion to her own infirmities. When Esther woke up to consciousness Mrs. Digby was asking her had she ever tried homœopathy, and Esther could not say that she had, though she had known people who had tried it with satisfactory results.

"It is almost the only system I have *not* tried," Mrs. Digby went on. "I have been under the water-cure, and *that* didn't suit me at all; the worse I was the more they worried me. Galvanism is worse than hydropathy, and as for mesmerism, I don't believe there is anything in it. Then

I pursued Dr. Coffin's system, and I should soon have been in my coffin if I had gone on with it. Then I was under a very clever man whose skill lay in the administration of active poisons. But that did not suit me; he said the system required a more vigorous constitution, and so I got frightened, for I was taking arsenic enough to kill an army of rats. I really must get homœopathic advice, and I have never tried the earth or mud baths in Switzerland, and I read about a miraculous cure at Assisi the other day: I wonder now whether there was anything in it; it sounded dreadfully like imposition."

Esther was getting sadly wearied, and was just wondering how a person so weak as Mrs. Digby could talk so incessantly, when Lancelot returned. "Mother, we want Miss Kendall, please. We are going to sing some hymns with the children, and she must help us. We will leave the door open, and then you can hear; let me put this shawl over you, then you will not feel any chill."

Esther thankfully consented to be carried off, and the next hour was spent very pleasantly at the old piano, which still, however, retained much of its original depth and brilliance of tone, and was, perhaps, as good as a newer one for sacred music. Edith's longing was for a harmonium, and Lancelot promised her one as soon as ever his ship came in! The children sang several hymns very sweetly to their sister's accompaniment, Lancelot leading the little choir; and then they sat still and listened quietly while Lancelot, Edith, and Esther went through a *Te Deum*, and tried their voices together in a *Kyrie* and in an *Agnus Dei*. Rupert joined them too with his tenor, which blended finely with Lance's bass, while it was a marvel how well the two girls sang together in first and second parts.

It was nearly eight o'clock when Edith said she must go and put some of the children to bed, then they would have one more hymn, and she and Lancelot would go with Esther through the wood on her way home.

"And in the meantime let us take a turn in the garden, Miss Kendall; there will be a marvellous sunset to-night," said Lancelot, gravely offering his arm.

As gravely Esther accepted it, and the two went alone to the highest grassy terrace which commanded the view Lettice had shown Esther in the afternoon. If it was fair then, it was fairer now in the rich sunset light. A deepening purple flush lay on the stately woods; the creeping ivy mantling the grey cliffs shone like emeralds set in rose-touched silver; the golden sands were all too bright to look upon; and beyond, like one large ruby, burned the heaving sea.

"Oh!" said Esther, drawing a deep breath, and shading her eyes from the dazzling glory of the sea and sky and glittering golden sands. Lancelot did not speak; he too stood still, slouching down his hat, and looking from beneath its broad brim on the landscape he knew so well, but which he had never seen in more beautiful array. "It is only *too* beautiful," he said at length, turning to his silent companion; and then he saw that tears were in her dark eyes, her hands were clasped, her head was slightly bowed, and her whole face was instinct with reverential love and awe.

"The sea of glass mingled with fire!" she said presently. "I could not have conceived of it! It has more of heaven than of earth in it!"

"A reflection of the heavenly beauty, perhaps, but no more, for it will not last. All that gorgeous colouring will quickly fade; a few minutes more and the rosy flush will be paler, the golden radiance will be dim, that crimson lake yonder will be a dark, wild waste of restless waters; earth will put off these robes of imperial purple, and lay aside her golden diadem, and array herself in the grey, hueless garments of the eventide."

"Grey and gold! it meets one at every turn."

"What do you mean?"

Then Esther told him her own fancies, if fancies they were, and she ended by saying, "Mr. Guise always told me that it lay very much with ourselves whether our lives were grey or golden, that much of our happiness was of our own making, and that, even in the greyest glooms, there might be golden gleams if only we would ask God to grant them, and if we looked for them."

"He was right. It is so easy to 'forge a life-long trouble' for one's self! I like your thought, Miss Kendall; the grey is good for us, no doubt. See! that gold yonder is so dazzling that we cannot look at it; even that transcendent colouring of rose, and violet, and amber hurts our weak sight. It is very lovely for a while, but we could not bear it long; even now one turns with a sense of relief to the soberer tints upon the woodlands. Still, one *does* love the sunshiny days! It is a pity there are so few of them."

"Are they so few?"

"Have you found it otherwise?"

"No! I have known far more of the grey than of the gold hitherto; but then my experiences have been peculiar, also they have been very limited."

"They have been peculiar!" said Lancelot, with some emphasis.

Esther blushed. When she spoke she had been thinking only of the old joyless days in Queen Square, and of the great change which had come to her with the advent of Florence Guise. She was sure that Mr. Digby's thoughts were on the events of the last few days; she felt quite certain that he knew all about them, and would he not think her bold and presuming in thus openly adverting to affairs which ought to be approached with the utmost delicacy? She was vexed with herself, and though she told herself that it did not matter she was conscious of a strong desire to stand well with Lancelot.

"Yes," she went on, in a rather ill-assured way, "my childhood was a very strange one, and I grew up amid surroundings that seem to me now almost as grotesque as they were painful. But I beg your pardon, it is not right that I should be intruding my private experiences on an utter stranger; we women are too apt to forget, I am afraid, that what is interesting to ourselves is not necessarily so to others."

"But you do not count me an 'utter stranger' surely, Miss Kendall?"

"It is not quite a month since I first saw you, and till *this evening* we had not exchanged half a dozen sentences."

"Friendships are not always to be estimated by time. There are some people whom we know intuitively at first sight ; a look, a word, puts us *en rapport* with them, and our affinities flash together almost unconsciously ; while, on the other hand, there are persons whom we may have known for years, whom we respect, whom in some sort we like, and in one sense love, yet in whom we never dream of confiding. One may live on terms of closest intimacy with such, and share with them all one's common life, and there may be mutual kindnesses and mutual forbearances, but the heart is a sealed book, its chronicles are written in unknown characters, and it would be folly to unveil one's secret hopes and fears, to disclose one's visions, to try to interpret one's-self, in fact, to a perfectly non-comprehending and non-answering mind — so that we are 'strangers yet,' though from outward appearances it might be concluded that our two lives were 'bound fast in one with golden ease.' But I did not mean to make so long a preface ; I was going to say, Miss Kendall, that I hope you will not treat me as a stranger. It may seem presumptuous to say so, but it is best to be candid—I believe I do understand you, though our acquaintance is of the briefest and the slightest, and I know I have no right to offer my help. Still, I think you will not mistake me, and I may be of service to you if you will let me."

"You are very kind. You spoke a little while ago of some friend in Paris who wanted—you did not say what she wanted, did you, Mr. Digby? "

"I did not. Let me tell you all about it. Some years ago, when I was at school in Paris, I made acquaintance with a French Protestant family of the name of Bethune ; they were very kind to me, they paid me all those little attentions which are so consoling to a schoolboy in a foreign country, and for the first few months of my residence at the *Pension Baudet* I was as miserable as a lad could be, and I was moreover a prey to as genuine a *mal du pays* as if I had been a middle-aged expatriated Swiss. How good these people were to me I can never tell you. Madame Bethune could not have been kinder to me had I been her own son,

and whenever I could absent myself from the *Pension* I spent my time with her. Her children were all older than myself—our intimacy came about through a nephew of hers, who was one of M. Baudet's *externes*—but the youngest Mademoiselle Bethune and I became great friends, though she, Adèle, was almost ten years my senior. Before I quitted Paris Adèle married her cousin, Eugène Bethune, with whom I speedily became intimate. Eight years have passed since then, but our friendly relations remain the same, though during the interval we have met but twice: once I paid them a visit, and once I saw them in London, where they were spending a few weeks. Eugène, Adèle, and I have carried on a regular correspondence, and only yesterday came a letter from Adèle asking me to find her an English governess for her three little girls. I must tell you that I had heard of your desire—of your resolve, I may say—to leave Chilcombe, and I thought of you immediately, and felt myself very lucky in finding the required article so promptly and so ready to hand.”

“But, Mr. Digby, I am afraid I am not fit. I must tell you I have had absolutely no education. I have not been to school since I was seven years old.”

“So much the better! I should never have sent Adèle Bethune a boarding-school miss. I have no opinion of boarding-schools for girls.”

“But I have to work hard to keep up with my elder pupils now, I assure you, and they are only village girls—the highest in rank among them is a well-to-do farmer's daughter, and these are young ladies.”

“Very young ladies! The *petite* Melanie is scarcely four years old, Hélène is not six, and Marie, the eldest, is just turned seven. My little nieces—they always call me ‘*mon oncle*’—are, I should say, tolerably good children; they are neither prodigies of cleverness nor miracles of virtue, so far as I can judge, but they are certainly amiable, docile, and affectionate, and they would not, I feel assured, be difficult to manage. Besides, you would have every assistance in the parents. Eugène, though an indulgent father, has clear good sense; and Adèle, though one of the tenderest of mothers, is

reasonable, and does not believe her children to be faultless, and she is extremely anxious to bring them up judiciously. I think you would work well together."

"If I could only be sure that I was competent!"

"You will not be incompetent, I am certain. You will have to teach three little girls to read and speak English; you will have to walk out with them, and keep them with you for certain hours every day, but they will not be your sole companions. You will find that Madame Eugène Bethune will treat you as a friend, as a sister, if you and she assimilate, as I am sure you will. It struck me from the first that you and Adèle would suit each other. I suppose I may assume that you do not really care to go with Lady Torrisdale?"

"No! oh, no! only I wanted to go to France, and that seemed the only way. But poor Fanny Tucker, she thought so much of getting away!"

"She may get away quite as easily as before. There is no obligation, either legal or moral, which binds her to Lady Torrisdale, and a thorough gentlewoman as Miss Tucker is, graceful and accomplished, with the advantage of foreign travel, can always secure a superior situation. It is only with inferior governesses that the market is overstocked."

"Such as I am, or rather such as I should make," said Esther, with a smile half sad.

"No, indeed! You are too genuine and too thorough to be inferior. It is not the quantity so much as the quality of our attainments that regulates our mental value. Believe me I would not send any one whom I thought inferior to such dear old friends as are the Bethunes. If I did not think you would be quite in the right place, I would not propose the plan, however I might wish to serve you; and I do wish to be of use to you, because——"

"Because why?"

"You must not think me very impertinent. Because I think you are placed in very painful circumstances, and also because I think you have behaved honourably—nobly!—as I should wish Edith to behave had she been in the same situation. I am afraid I have offended you. I ought not to

have spoken of your trouble. I am, as you say, an acquaintance of yesterday ; but if you could know how I admired your fortitude, your truth, you would not be surprised. You see Oswald came and told me all about it ; he has always told me things ever since we were boys together, and old habits are difficult to break. Do not be distressed !” for Esther’s cheeks were burning, and her face was troubled ; “he told me nothing that was not altogether to your honour. Of course I do not flatter myself that my opinion is of any value to you, but I must say I think you have acted rightly ; I do not see how you could have done otherwise.”

“Oh ! thank you,” said Esther, catching her breath ; “it is a great comfort to hear you say so. I felt sure I was right, and yet it seemed wrong to go against everybody.”

“Against everybody ?”

“Well, I expressed myself foolishly. I should have said exactly what I meant. The ‘everybody’ comprises Miss Uffadyne and Mrs. King ; they both thought I was acting unadvisedly.”

“I know Miss Uffadyne has espoused her brother’s cause, and is anxious that he should succeed ; and she naturally wishes to win you over. In some sort it is much to her honour that she feels so ; but I am surprised at Mrs. King, a woman of prudence and principle, endeavouring to dissuade you from a course which, however painful, is undubitably the only one you can take with comfort and honour to yourself.”

“I am so glad you think so ; but Mrs. King did not object to my refusing to listen to Miss Cecil’s plans. She encouraged me to be firm ; but she said I must not think of going away. When I had said I went against everybody I meant that all to whom I had spoken opposed my leaving Chilcombe.”

“I see. I thought you meant that Mrs. King as well as Miss Uffadyne urged you to consider your decision—the decision I mean which Oswald reported to me the same evening he met you at the ruins. There are not many girls who would have been strong enough to resist the temptation.”

“*It was not a temptation, Mr. Digby ; it was only a great*

trouble—a misery ! I was so happy at Chilcombe ; I hoped the Slade would be my home for many and many a year, and then came all this FUSS !—I really do not know what else to call it—this wretched, stupid fuss !”

“ And you really look upon it in this light ? You were not tempted ? ”

“ What could tempt me ? A man who belonged to another woman, and for whom I could never feel the smallest affection—for whom I have now lost all respect ? I speak the simple truth when I say that, putting Miss Guise entirely out of the question, I never could have cared for Mr. Uffadyne—that is, not in the way he wished. So there is not so much merit in my conduct as some people might suppose. Please don’t fancy there is any self-sacrifice about it—except, indeed, the sacrifice of going away from the place I love so well and from friends from whom I would not willingly be separated. And you think I ought to go ? ”

“ For the present I do think you are better away. Oswald would not—indeed, just now he could not leave Somersetshire, and while he is here and you are here you will never be free of him. He will press his suit till it becomes persecution. He has no idea of not having his own way, and your refusal he persists in attributing to coyness. He is like a spoiled child, unable to comprehend that what he so ardently desires can be withheld.”

“ He is very selfish ! I do not believe in his love. If I loved anybody I am sure I would do anything rather than bring him into the trouble he has brought upon me. I would conquer myself, whatever it might cost ; in his place I would have died before I would have spoken.”

“ You think love can be conquered ? ”

“ I am not sure. I suppose if it were right to conquer it it could be conquered ; but I meant that I would never permit its expression if I knew that it would cost the person I loved one hour of suffering. It cannot be true love that which calls itself so and yet cannot practise self-abnegation. *I felt this* when I resolved to go quite away, and leave Miss Guise to doubt and misunderstand me, rather than let her

know the truth at the expense of her own happiness. The bitterest drop in the cup that Mr. Oswald has forced upon me is the certainty that I shall grieve and disappoint my best friend ; that she cannot but distrust me and count me heartless and ungrateful. I think I could go to France quite happily if I knew that Florence did not condemn me ; yet I would rather she despised and loathed me than that she should know what must make her miserable for life."

"Miss Kendall ! what if I tell you that she does know ?"

"Oh ! is it possible ? Who could be so cruel ?" cried Esther, turning very pale, and sinking on the grassy bank. "Surely *you* did not let her know, Mr. Digby ?"

"Indeed I did not ! Oswald came to me last night, and told me that all was over between his cousin and himself. Florence herself cancelled the engagement ; she dismissed him quite coolly, quite calmly, he says, though I can see that he scarcely believes his own interpretations of her behaviour. He is convinced that she loved him no more than he loved her, and that she too is thankful to be free."

"He knows nothing about love !" said Esther, warmly ; "he loves himself too much. To please himself, to gratify his own fickle caprices, he does not care how he tortures the girl who has loved him so fully and so faithfully. He takes her womanly pride for coldness, her modesty for indifference ; he is only too glad to attain his ends at any price. Cruel, cruel man, and poor unhappy Florence !"

"I am very sorry for Miss Guise, and I think Oswald's conduct indefensible ; but, Miss Kendall, since his love was not the real thing it is better that she should know it without delay. He was not worthy of Florence Guise ; still less is he worthy of you !"

"He is not worthy of me," replied Esther, quietly ; "all his wealth and high breeding, all his learning, and all his position as lord of Guise, cannot make him worthy of me, poor girl as I am ! I do not aspire to mate with one of his degree, but the man I marry—if I ever do marry—must be one of whom I can never be ashamed. It must be dreadful to belong to one whom you cannot reverence."

"Most dreadful, I should imagine. And what will you decide about Madame Eugène Bethune?"

"Is it necessary to decide immediately?"

"I should like to answer my friend's letter to-morrow; but if you feel any hesitation——"

"It is not that, but I suppose I ought to weigh the matter a little, and to consult Mrs. King; it would be of no use to speak to Miss Cecil."

"Not the slightest; she would only oppose you, and without really affecting your judgment, make you feel uncomfortable and doubtful about yourself. Say what you like to Mrs. King; she is sensible, and she is your friend. I will call at the Slade to-morrow evening; that will give you plenty of time to know your own mind, and to take such counsel as you deem expedient."

"Thank you! You are most kind, Mr. Digby. How things are 'ordered!' I met you the other day by chance, as it were, and now you are *my friend*, raised up for me, by God, it seems to me, in this emergency."

"You believe, then, that all the odds and ends of our lives are guided by Providence?"

"To be sure I do! I, of all people, should be most wicked if I doubted it. And, after all, it is upon the little incidents, the small, apparently unimportant changes, that our fate principally depends."

"You are right; and even when violent alterations occur they can generally be traced to very trivial sources. Life is composed of one unbroken chain of events, wrought and fashioned by the Great and All-wise Artificer; the links are various in size and shape, and some can scarcely be discerned, they are so nearly hidden among the heavier and more elaborate workmanship; yet if one were missing the chain would be incomplete."

"But I do not quite understand about Miss Guise. Can you tell me what she knows? I hope she does not think that for one moment I was false to her!"

"She knows the truth, and it is a great comfort to her to *think* that there has been no treachery on your part. She *had* learned, I do not know how, that Oswald met you that

night at the ruins, and she quite understands now what at the time seemed rather unsatisfactory. She thoroughly appreciates your considerate silence, and thanks you for it."

"I am so glad! so thankful! Shall I tell you, Mr. Digby? I felt so naughty and impatient this morning; my burden seemed greater than I could bear; I did not know which way to turn—all was perplexity and gloom. I could have hated Mr. Uffadyne; I was angry with Miss Cecil; I was vexed even with good, kind Mrs. King. And now, only a few hours later, and the clouds break, and there is once more a gleam of sunshine. As I walked here this afternoon I felt so sad; the waving trees, and the singing birds, and the glittering waters, seemed to mock me with their joy and brightness. Ah! I was very faithless, and yet I ought not to have doubted; God has been so very good to me in the time that is past."

"I know just what you mean; I have felt exactly so."

"Have you indeed?"

"Yes; for things have seemed going all wrong with me ever since I was a boy. You know we Digbys are very poor, Miss Kendall—poor and proud; and it goes sadly against the grain that any Digby should work for his living. Nevertheless, Rupert and I both believe in the dignity of honest labour, and in the degradation of idleness and poverty; and we have both resolved to put shoulder to the wheel, and try if we cannot do something to redeem this old inheritance of ours from its terrible involvements. Rupert goes in for commerce; I aspire to join the noble army of authors."

"But, forgive me—I am really very ignorant—does writing poetry ever bring in *money*?"

"Not often, perhaps; but it does sometimes; and I feel that I have the stuff in me. Hitherto I have been content to dream and plan, to build castles in the air. Now, please God, I mean to *work* in real earnest—to go in for the prize which awaits the successful aspirant for literary honours—and *win it*. I will tell you a secret, Miss Kendall; last week I received the first payment for my numerous contributions, and a request for more. Look! here is a cheque for £10 from the editor of the *Grosvenor*. This I thankfully

receive as the *first fruits*. I shall have to work hard, I have lost so much time, yet do not think I have been quite idle ; —only I have wanted an inducement."

The last words Lancelot spoke as if to himself, and Esther wondered he had not thought sooner of clearing his father's estate from its manifold embarrassments, if indeed his literary efforts could so far avail. Esther herself had some notion that poetry was not any such great "yield," so far as pecuniary results were concerned. They turned now to go back to the house ; the soft, fragrant twilight was around them, and the woods lay calm and grand in the solemn hush of evening.

"The golden glory is gone," said Lancelot, looking where the shining sands had given place to gray stretches, crossed here and there by slants of sombre violet.

"Gone from earth ; but we find it again in heaven !" said Esther, with a radiant smile, as she pointed upwards to the bright pink clouds floating high in the zenith, and then to the clear rose flush high up between the hills.

"Miss Kendall, I shall write a poem and call it ' Grey and Gold.' It will make my fortune, and it will be to you that I owe the inspiration."

CHAPTER XLV.

THE TALISMAN.

"WELL, my child, if you must go, I suppose you cannot do better than go to this *madame* whom Mr. Lancelot knows," said Mrs. King, wiping her eyes, when she and Esther had quietly talked the matter over. "But it does seem very hard, just as we had got to be so fond of you—the farmer and me—feeling just as if you were a daughter of our own ! And it is no fault of yours or of ours that we must part. That makes it so very hard !"

"Dear Mrs. King, I think it would be far harder if it were any fault of ours that separated us. And, indeed, I cannot feel that I am quite free from blame ; I ought to have

heeded you that day I went to Guise, when you wished Mr. King to drive me over. I can see now how very wise you were, and I was so foolish and headstrong."

"Tut, tut, child ! I don't mean to say but that it would have been better if you had gone over with the farmer, but the mischief would have been done, I suppose, just the same. It was all in Mr. Oswald's mind, I should say, long before he came here that evening when we were out in the porch watching the moon rise. It would have come out sooner or later."

"How long ago that evening seems," said Esther thoughtfully ; "the old, sweet life was ending then, only I did not know it."

"A good thing you did not ! A good thing that the future is hidden from our eyes ; and such a comfort to think that what we don't know God does know ! It is so good to feel just like a child who is trustful and happy because his father knows all about everything. I remember, some years ago, my soul got into strange trouble. A gentleman came here to lodge ; he was a great scholar, and he brought heaps of books with him, and sometimes he talked to me and read pages out of his clever books. I learned what I had never learned before, for I learned to doubt pretty nearly everything except God Himself. The worst of it was, that there seemed to be a great deal of truth in what Mr. Elvas urged, and some truth there was, I daresay ; for though I do not believe less than in earlier days, I believe differently. But while it lasted the perplexity was wretched and the gloom was dreadful ; I felt as if the solid ground I had stood upon all my life was sinking and crumbling beneath me. Especially I was exercised in my mind about the life of the world to come ; all my old, comfortable ideas about dying and going to heaven were put to flight, and looking beyond the grave was just reaching out into the dark. And one day I was walking up and down, haunted by the evil spirit, and telling myself that I knew nothing, and never could know anything certainly, when, all of a sudden, a voice spoke to me—I don't mean I heard any sound—the voice that spoke was in my heart, and I know now it was the Blessed Spirit Himself,

comforting me and calming away my fears, and it said, 'God knows.' Just that ; no more. I was in the filbert walk—oh, dear ! how well I recollect it—and I sat down on the little green bench and cried for joy, and I kept saying to myself over and over again, 'God knows ; my Father knows. He loves me ; nothing can harm me.' I have never troubled myself about difficult questions since ; when the puzzles came again, I just smiled and said, 'God knows ; what does it matter if I do not know ? Some day He will show me what now I cannot see ; some day all mysteries will be made plain.' And ever since then that has been my talisman—those two simple words, that seem at first to have so little in them beyond a common, bare assertion that one hears continually from careless lips. All sorts of troubles have come since then — money troubles, which, though really of no great weight, are of all others the most worrying and harassing ; vexations, disappointments, wrongs, illness, death, all sorts of trials, and my one comfort has always been, '*God knows.*' He knows why the trouble comes, and how it will work, and how long it will last. I cannot see my way, I do not know my path ; but Thou, my God, knowest its every step, its every turning, and its every difficulty ! This morning your way seemed all edged up with thorns, but God knew all the time how it would be ; and see, my dear, He has cleared your road—He makes it plain ; He knows just what He will have you to be, and what He will have you to do, and He will lead you by a way you know not, according to His good will, for He doeth all things well. Ah ! the joy of resting on the everlasting arms ! Some people think that is only an experience for a dying hour ; but I am sure the dear Lord means us to honour him in life as well as in death. A Christian that does not trust God and rest in Him must, I think, be more unhappy than one who does not think about God at all."

"Such a Christianity must be a very maimed, incomplete sort of an affair, if, indeed, it can be called Christianity at all. *Can a person be a Christian, and not trust ?*"

"The rash judgment of youth would say, 'No.' Larger experiences say, 'Yes.' People's temperaments are not

altered by Christianity, and their temptations come chiefly from their temperament. Some are naturally fearful and apprehensive, and given to look on the dark side ; they can't help it, and the Lord knows that, and makes allowances. He doesn't expect to make a silver trumpet out of a ram's horn, nor does He look for the finest wheaten bread from rye or barley-meal. Every man in his own order. There again is the comfort—*God knows !* Man thinks he knows, and he is speedy to condemn ; he cannot think the work to be a good work if it be not wrought according to his own pattern. But then he does not see the workings of the heart and brain, which in God's pure light may look far other than they seem to man's poor, dim, uncertain vision."

" Ah ! that reminds me of what I was reading last Sunday at Guise Court — Fanny Tucker and I were reading it together—a poem called 'Judge Not.' Let me tell you the last two verses. I read them over till I knew them by heart :—

" 'The fall thou darest to despise—
 Maybe the angel's slackened hand
 Has suffered it, that he may rise,
 And take a firmer, surer stand ;
 Or, trusting less to earthly things,
 May henceforth learn to use his wings.

" ' *And judge none lost, but wait and see,
 With hopeful pity, not disdain ;
 The depth of the abyss may be
 The measure of the height of pain,
 And love and glory that may raise
 This soul to God in after-days.' "*

" Ah, that is very beautiful ! I shall miss you so, Esther, in all sorts of ways, and I shall feel the lack of the choice little bits you are so often bringing to me out of fine books. You see, I am no great reader, and some kinds of books never come in my way. I cannot be a busy bee, and go into every flower sucking out the sweets ; I want my honey ready-made, as you have brought it to me many and many a time. Ah, child, I shall miss you ! But if it is for your good—it *must* be for your good, it comes about so—I cannot complain. *Only remember this is always your home, and while either*

the farmer or I live you never need feel there is no place you can call your own."

"I shall always call the Slade home," said Esther, tearfully. "When I am far, far away, I shall think of you as if you were my very own mother. You say God sent me to you instead of the little girls whom He took to Himself. I am sure He has given you to me instead of the mother I never knew; and I shall write to you as often as ever I can, and come to see you, if it may be, in my holidays; and I shall always call coming back to the Slade coming *home*! Yes, God is very good to me in giving me a home on earth such as I never thought to have. Even though I must leave it, its memory will be very sweet and comforting; besides, I shall hope to come back to Chilcombe some day, and be a real daughter to you, dear Mrs. King."

On Monday evening Lancelot came, and received Esther's final decision, which was fortified by the counsel of Mrs. King, and the next day he wrote to Madame Eugène Bethune, giving her some account of Esther, and so much of her history as he thought it was right to communicate. The result was a letter from Madame Bethune on the Friday morning, addressed to Esther herself, requesting her to hold herself in readiness for the journey as soon as might be convenient. "It is all settled," said Madame in conclusion, "if you will have it so. It only remains that you make the conclusions with the lady to whom you are attached to-day, and set out as soon as you may prepare yourself. I shall have sentiments of pleasure in welcoming to my abode one who is known and esteemed by my ancient and dear friend, M. Digby, and I have the most lively hopes that we shall be good companions. If you can find any one to place you on board the steamboat at Folkestone, I will have care that you are met at Boulogne, and placed in the train for Paris. You shall have no trouble; have no fear."

When Cecil heard of Esther's arrangements she was extremely angry, and she thought at first that she would *let her go* without any further notice; but Cecil with all *her faults* was true and just at heart, and she could not but *blame Oswald* and applaud Esther; besides, she really loved

the girl. As for Oswald he was nearly frantic, and vowed that he would pursue her to the ends of the earth. He had never believed that she would actually and of her own free will leave Chilcombe. But Esther's greatest trouble was concerning Florence. It was dreadful to leave her without one word of farewell, and yet she dared not present herself at Guise Court; for, as she said to Mrs. King, "though I am not to blame, the very sight of me must hurt her!"

Esther resolved to write a loving, humble note, bidding good-bye to Miss Guise, and she had even written out one rough copy which did not satisfy her, it expressed her real feelings so inadequately, when one evening, as she was busy with her needlework, Florence was announced. All doubt, all constraint vanished as the two girls met face to face, and Esther knew that though, through her, Oswald had struck at Florence's heart, she was not to lose her friend. It was some minutes before either could speak calmly, and then Florence said: "And it is true that you are going away—going to Paris?"

"Yes; I go as soon as Miss Cecil can find my successor; Madame Bethune is anxious that I should not delay. It was best to go, was it not?"

"I hardly know. When I heard of it I felt that I was driving you away."

"No, indeed; I could not be happy here as things are now. Dear Miss Guise, it is hard to leave you, whom I promised never to desert, but this seems the only way to keep my promise. I could not stay where I must continually meet——"

"Mr. Uffadyne. But, Esther, I have a question to ask you—it is a very delicate question, I know, but I think I have a right to ask it, and I beseech you to answer me without reserve and as in God's sight: do you *love* Oswald Uffadyne?"

"No, Miss Guise, I do not. If he had never been engaged to you, if you and he were strangers, nothing would induce me to marry him."

"Because, Esther, if you did love him it were a pity to *sacrifice yourself* as well as him. I can never marry him

now, for I do not love him any more ; as the husband of another woman he could not be more lost to me than he is at this moment. Therefore I conjure you do not deceive yourself, do not for my sake renounce the happiness that is within your reach. I acquit you of all blame, whatever may betide ; you could not help it if Oswald loved you—me he never loved. I feel it now, and I have felt it for months past. Even when we first talked about him in Queen Square, I felt dimly, though I put the feeling away, that I was not to him what he was to me. But I did not love the Oswald that loved you ; I loved an ideal of my own—a beautiful myth that had no actual existence. Ah, me ! we women are given to creating ideals for ourselves, and then worshipping them with a vain worship. Esther, if I thought you truly cared for Oswald, I would say, marry him, and God's blessing be with you ; but if——”

“I do *not* care, and I do not believe he properly cares for me. It is a wild, foolish passion, that will die out for want of sustenance. I firmly believe that after all it is you whom he truly loves ; I think he will come back to you.”

“I hope not, Esther, for I cannot take him back : one cannot love and unlove at will. He has killed the deep love I bore him, but he cannot bring it to life again any more than you could restore that gay butterfly to animation if you crushed it.”

“But if he came back to you changed and purified and strengthened, another yet the same ? If the ideal Oswald became reality ?”

“Do not speak of it. Ah ! he has been very cruel to us both. He has made me suffer, God only knows how bitterly, and he is banishing you. What will it all come to ?”

“God knows,” said Esther gravely. “Miss Guise, that is to be my talisman. When I fear any evil, when I doubt, when I cannot see my way, I shall think that God knows all, and He loves me with a love as perfectly wise as it is strong and tender.”

The friends talked till it grew late, and then good-byes were said with many tears. Two days afterwards came a

travelling trunk well filled with such things as Esther might need to recruit her wardrobe for her new position, also a gold chain and an enamelled locket containing Florence's portrait. Then it was announced that Cecil and Fanny Tucker had come to terms, so that Esther need delay no longer. A few more days, and she took her departure, bearing with her the good-will and affection of many friends, also the talisman that was to shield her from all real harm ; and in her note-book which she always carried with her she wrote, the night before she left the Slade—" *God knows.*"

CHAPTER XLVI.

VIA BOULOGNE.

It must be confessed that Esther's heart died within her when she saw receding in the far blue hazy distance the white cliffs of old England. I think till that moment she had not realised the true bitterness of her self-expatriation ; the excitement of her explanations with Florence, the bustle of preparation, and the agitation of leave-takings, had kept her too much occupied to have leisure for many painful regrets. Up to the moment of setting out there was always something to be said or to be done, some message to be sent to some one, or some parting injunction to be remembered ; and no sooner did she give way to a rush of feeling than she was roused by some urgent application, some demand on her time or attention or sympathy, so that she really had no leisure for the indulgence of sorrowful meditations.

But now that there was nothing to do but to sit still and watch the pale green waves rising and falling, and the long line of silvery cliffs fading along the blue horizon, she felt that she was indeed leaving all the brightness of her life behind her. She envied even the poorest day labourer, who might stay on year after year at Chilcombe ; she thought sadly and lovingly of the fair green Helmsley wood, of the old Norman church, and of the lovely terraced garden of the *Grange*. She had just learned to care for them so much, oh,

so very much, and now she was torn away from them, not knowing how long it might be ere she could revisit them. And Florence, too, near whom she had hoped to be always, and the kind, good Kings, not to speak of the Digbys and Cecil, how hard it was to leave all these behind, and go to live with strangers in a strange land—it might be for long years of weary exile.

“If I did but know for how long,” she said to herself, almost impatiently, “if there were but some limit to my term of banishment ; how do I know but what I never, never may come back again to my own dear country ?”

And instantly the answer came, “*God knows.* Why disquiet thyself, oh, foolish, faithless soul? Is it not enough that the good Lord knows all thy way before thee, the Lord of heaven and earth, thy *Father* ?”

And the soft murmur of the waves, as in measured cadence they rose and fell and sparkled in the sweet September sunlight, seemed to say, or rather to sing, again and again, “Why art thou cast down, oh, my soul, and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God, for I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance and my God.”

And once more Esther was comforted, and the spirit of hope grew strong again within her, because, instead of listening to echoes of her own complainings, she hearkened to God’s voice in her soul, bidding her be of good cheer, and wait patiently and trustfully for that which as yet was hidden from her sight.

And here I would say most earnestly and seriously Esther’s experience was no exceptional case, no rare instance of Divine consolation. God always speaks tenderly and hopefully to His children in their day of distress, but they will not hear, or hearing will not heed the gentle whispers which bid them not despair. They choose rather to abide in their sadness, to commune with their own dreary thoughts, to murmur at their trials and vexations, to bewail that which is past, and to shrink pitifully from that which is to come. They have no true faith ; they are in their hearts *angry* because their *gourd* has withered away ; they absolutely refuse to be comforted. Oh ! what wonderful patience God has with us His

wayward, fretful, rebellious creatures. How again and again, though often disdained and repelled, He comes and says, "My child, why these fears? Am I not thy Father? Shall I refuse thee any *good* thing? Do I not know the way thou shouldst go — the best way, the only safe way for thy poor tripping feet and blind unwisdom? Am I not leading thee to the eternal habitations?"

Blessed—yea, thrice blessed are they who can reply, "Even so, Father, lead me whithersoever Thou willest, for all Thy will is goodness and kindness; only let me feel Thy hand, what time the darkness gathers round me, and I am afraid."

And Esther wiped away her tears, and after one long, tender gaze she bravely turned her head towards the French coast, which was every moment growing clearer and more distinct; they had had a most favourable passage, and to all her other misfortunes had not been added the inexpressible miseries of sea-sickness.

"No," she said, firmly holding her hands, "I will look back no more; I will set my face towards the land whither I am going, for there my life must be, there I am to live and grow in goodness and wisdom, to be a blessing and to be blessed. Yes, I am sure a blessing is awaiting me; God has sent me hither, and I must do what He bids me, and wait till He chooses to give me a new supply of happiness. But am I unhappy now? Well, I really believe *I am not*. I have suffered much, it is true, but it might well have been more; there have been no end of mercies in the trial. I am young and strong, and all my days are before me. Why should I be unhappy when I am so sure that it will all turn out well at last? Now then, good bye, dear old England; good bye, beloved friends! Most lovingly will I think of you, and I will pray for you continually; but I will not, God helping me, waste the life that He has given me in vain regrets. Welcome, *la belle France*! I will try to like you, and get good from you, and make the very best of you. I do believe that one's happiness and success depend not so much upon the circumstances of one's lot as upon the way in which one treats the circumstances. It must be a Christian's duty to *make the very best of every change, of every fresh opening, of*

all new experiences ; and as for accepting the inevitable, about which philosophers talk so wisely, it is just giving one's self up to God's will, instead of striving for one's own will. Any sort of grumbling must but be displeasing to God, and even if it were not it is the silliest thing imaginable. I have heard Mrs. King say nothing is ever to be gained by discontent and vapouring ; even if a thing can't be mended fretting and worrying about it only make it worse to bear. And I am sure a person who is always making his or her moan over trials and crosses is one of the greatest nuisances on earth. It would be better to dwell in the meanest hut and live on a crust with a cheerful, sensible person who looked on the bright side of things, than in a palace, and fare sumptuously every day, with one who was ever complaining and describing grievances. God grant that I may keep a cheerful, patient heart, whatever may betide ! ”

And while Esther mused thus, and did her very utmost to brace herself for all possible encounters, the steamer was gliding swiftly towards the pier. In a few minutes arose a mighty gabbling, a confusion of tongues worthy of Babel itself ; then the boat came to and there ensued great pullings and haulings of heavy luggage, and while Esther was looking after her especial *baggage* a gentleman stretched out a hand, while at the same time he took off his hat, and bowed as only a Frenchman can bow, and said, interrogatively, “ *Mademoiselle Kendall ?* ”

Esther at once owned to the name, but how strange it sounded to be accosted as *mademoiselle* ! The speaker was a Monsieur Véron, a man of middle age and courtly bearing, and twenty years before he had married Valerie, eldest daughter of Madame Bethune, so that he was brother-in-law to Adèle and Eugène, Lancelot's friends in Paris.

M. Véron spoke perfectly good English, and thus Esther was spared all difficulties in landing—difficulties which she owned to herself would have been rather embarrassing, since her quick ear instantly detected the difference between the French which every one was pattering so glibly about her and the French which she had so laboriously acquired. Therefore it was excellent to find some one who could both

speaking for her and speaking to her, and at the same time undertake all her affairs.

Rather reserved in manner, but perfectly kind, and even fatherly was M. Véron in his conduct to the young girl confided to his care, and under his guidance Esther felt quite comfortable and assured. But she wondered greatly whither he was taking her; his own carriage and his servants were in attendance, and she was being borne away through the unfamiliar streets, past tall white houses with high roofs and Venetian-shuttered windows, while foreign-looking men and women walked up and down the pavement, and there was a jingle of bells round the horses' necks, and the air was wonderfully clear and soft, and everything was strangely new and un-English-looking, though Boulogne is perhaps the most English of all French towns.

"You will be our guest to-night, Mademoiselle," said M. Véron, presently. "My wife and I are going to Paris to-morrow, and we shall have the pleasure of taking charge of you. It has been so arranged by Madame Eugène Bethune. We design to stop for a few hours at Amiens, in order to show our daughter, Justine, the cathedral. You will probably not object to the delay? You, too, will be a stranger to the town."

Shortly afterwards the carriage turned under a broad archway, and they alighted in a square, paved courtyard, around which were ranged orange-trees in great green tubs. Madame Véron, with her youngest child, a bronze-complexioned boy of five or six, was standing at what Esther supposed must be the back door, so different was it from all principal entrances to which she had been accustomed. Madame received her very kindly, and with all the volubility of her country she condoled with her on the fatigue she must be suffering after her voyage, and congratulated her on her arrival in the most charming country in the universe, and on her excellent fortune in being located in Paris, the most eligible and delightful residence that a young lady could possibly desire. Madame's English was scarcely so good as her husband's, and she expressed herself very oddly, while her French was so incomprehensible to her listener that

it was only by dint of painful attention she could here and there recognise a familiar word. The boy whom Madame introduced as "her little last one," thus literally translating "*petit dernier*," prattled away in his native language, vehemently gesticulating, while he described to his *cher papa* some event that had taken place in his absence. It was all very natural of course; but it seemed strange enough to Esther.

It seemed stranger still when she was escorted up two flights of wide, uncarpeted, dirty stairs, up to a broad landing on a second floor, where there was a pair of folding doors, which led to an inner passage, dark, and long, and narrow, into which opened the doors of a handsome suite of rooms. There was the *grande salon*, all white and gold, with yellow silk hangings, and plenty of ormolu, the floor only partly covered with carpet, and on the chimney-piece, hung with rich blue velvet and gold fringe, the inevitable timepiece, without which no French apartment can be considered furnished. It looked sadly unhome-like, Esther thought. How different from the drawing-rooms at Guise and at the Chenies! Could she ever feel at home in such fine, tricked-out rooms, which seemed rather for show than for actual living in? Instinctively she remembered a couplet she had heard in childhood, the refrain of a jaunty little poem, supposed to describe the habits and manners of our Gallic neighbours:—

"Fond of living out of doors,
They've no carpets on their floors."

The chamber into which Esther was shown was, after its kind, magnificent. Her bed, all white muslin and rose-coloured bows, was in a recess; velvet-covered chairs were ranged round the room, mirrors were everywhere, and the washing accommodations, which were on the very smallest scale, were stowed away into a little closet, with a tiled floor, and a second door in it, leading apparently into another room.

Dinner was soon announced, and the *salle-a-manger* increased Esther's astonishment. It was quite uncarpeted, and it contained no furniture save a long oval table, and a

certain number of shabby chairs, an ugly unpolished mahogany waggon for dishes, etc., and a large tiled stove in a corner of the apartment. But the dinner was excellent, commencing of course with the *potage*, and ending with a wonderful dessert of bloomy grapes and plums, melting peaches, and sunny apricots. How many courses came between the first and last acts of the performance Esther strove in vain to remember, for everything was handed round separately, and the salad, which was mixed at table, and the vegetables, all curiously dressed, were certainly distinct courses, and not mere accompaniments as with us.

And everybody talked gaily. Justine Véron was pretty and gentle, and she chatted with Esther in piquant broken English, and encouraged her to stumble out a few French sentences, to which the French girl listened as serenely as if they had been of purely Parisian accent and idiom. There was little time for thought, it was all so strange and so exciting; and presently coffee was served, and everybody was pressed to take a *demi-tasse*, and then Madame Véron proposed a walk on the jetty, as the night was brilliantly clear and very warm. And when at last Esther found herself shut in with the mirrors and the velvet chairs, she was too tired to remember; she had not lain five minutes beneath the cloud-like muslin curtains, with their bright pink bows, before she was fast asleep; and so sound were her slumbers that she had no dreams as far as she could recollect, neither was she conscious of sight or sound, till the chiming of some church-bells near at hand awoke her; and while she was rubbing her eyes, and trying to recall the events of yesterday, some one tapped at her door, and there entered a stout, rosy young woman, in a short blue petticoat and gay jacket, and a stiff white cap—a very smiling, cheery damsel, extremely vivacious and quite inclined to converse with the *demoiselle Anglaise*, had any interchange of sentiment been possible; but Celine's English was more limited even than Esther's French, so that nothing could be accomplished in the way of conversation, and Celine, still smiling and gesticulating, took her departure, leaving behind her a cup of fragrant coffee and a buttered roll.

Esther opened her window and looked down; her chamber was *au troisième*, but there were four, if not five, storeys above her. She wondered what any one could possibly want with so vast a house, and the Véron family was not extensive. And down below there was a tremendous clatter—tongues going at a pace incredible, strange cries, and bells tinkling and jingling on every horse's collar—nay, some of these creatures wore a perfect necklace of little bells, and were decorated with tufts and fringes of blue and red worsted.

While she studied the unfamiliar scene, Mademoiselle Justine came to ask her if she would like a walk upon the beach before breakfast, which was not till ten o'clock; and Esther gladly accepted the invitation. Soon they were in the *Place*, and the soft morning air came up with invigorating freshness from the sea; and that, when reached, was all clear and green, dashing about and flinging up its feathery spray all sparkling in the sunshine, for the morning was beautiful and the sky purely blue, almost without a cloud. On one part of the beach bathing was going on energetically, and there was also a fair show of pedestrians, many of them evidently English, taking their matitudinal exercise and inhaling the sea-breezes. In the town itself they had not met many persons, save those intent on business, and certainly all the cooks in Boulogne-sur-Mer were a-gate buying in the day's provisions; for it is not considered *en règle* in France that a lady should do her own marketing. There were also people going to or returning from early mass, and sailors and fishermen sauntering idly about at the water's edge, the rest of the population, save the bathers and the promenaders, were safely ensconced behind the Venetian shutters, which were the regular appendages of every house.

It was not very far from Folkestone to Boulogne, but the nationalities wore an entirely different aspect on either side of the Channel: the tall white houses, with their high roofs and long rows of shuttered windows, the busy hum of voices, and the bonnetless women bearing away slices of huge melons, and bargaining volubly for vegetables for the day's *potage*, were so unlike anything Esther had seen before

that she felt she had indeed come "out of England into France;" and many were the tender, wistful glances she threw across the silvery green waves, which were courtesying and dancing at her feet as lightly and gaily as if they knew that they were rippling on the shores of pleasure-loving France.

"Ah!" said Justine, sympathetically; "it is that you are home-sick already, is it not, *chère mees*?"

"No," said Esther, slowly, "I think not; but I feel that there, across that water, is my own country, and there are my friends; and only yesterday I was there too." And in spite of every effort her voice faltered a little, and as she looked across the waves a very suspicious mistiness dimmed the view.

"Ah!" said Justine, "but it is *triste* to make the adieux always. I have never in all my life left my dear *mamma* and my *papa*, who are so good to me. I think I should die if I had to go far from them where I could not see them each morning. I shall never leave them till I marry — of course I must be married!"

"Is there any '*must*' in the case?" asked Esther, with a smile; but Justine did not understand her, and she had to repeat the question differently—"You are not *obliged* to be married, are you?"

"Every girl must be *established* if she have not the religious vocation — that is our French rule. It gives us no trouble: *le bon papa* or *la chère maman*, or all the two, perhaps, arrange it. Some day — very soon, I know — my *maman* will come to me, and she will say, 'Ma fille, we must marry you; it is the time, and M. de Quelqu'un has spoken to your *papa* about his son. He will give him so many francs, and it is all decided about your *dot*' — what you call *dowerie*. And it will be settled, and I shall courtesy and kiss my *maman*, and the two *papas* will meet, and there will be signing and all that, and the young man will come, and I shall be *fiancée*."

"But suppose you do not like him?"

"Oh! *pour cela*," replied Justine, shrugging her shoulders, "I shall be sure to like him when I know he is to be my

husband. I have heard, been told that the young ladies in England have choice, but here it is not expected that a girl of any rank should show the preference; we think it not quite *modeste*, you understand. It is not right to care for one *jeune homme*, nor even to regard him or converse with him alone till he become your *futur*. Then you may talk with him, and he will give you bouquets and all sorts of pretty things, and the trousseau will be ordered, and presently there will be the *corbeille* and then the *mariage*. *Après cela* you may love as much as you like, *mais* before *les noces* it is not respectable, and no well-brought-up *demoiselle* would think of such a thing."

Esther was about to make some rejoinder, but prudence bade her be silent. She felt quite inclined to inveigh strongly against such a state of things as Justine Véron described, but in good time it occurred to her that she had no right to shock the prejudices of this French girl, whose parents would certainly not expect her to evince any preference of her own, but take obediently the *fiancé* their wisdom should select. If she said anything to Justine, and Justine afterwards should have the audacity to refuse the offer of her sanctioned *prétendu*, or to think of choosing for herself, she might be accused of having corrupted the girl's principles. By this time it was requisite to think about breakfast. The sea air had made both the girls hungry, and they were quite ready for the very substantial and extensive *déjeuner* which awaited their return. A very composite sort of meal it seemed to Esther, with its made dishes, and hot vegetables, and decanters of red wine—a queer medley of dinner and breakfast, having also a decided reference to luncheon. But it was all very good, though some dishes were dark mysteries, and she felt that if she could not all at once adopt French customs, she was certainly taking to French cookery as naturally as ducks take to water.

Another hour and they were all on the road to Amiens, not a particularly interesting journey, as every one who has made it will testify; but they had taken the express train, and were not very long upon the way, and ere any one had time to grow weary there was the railway-station and the

city on the Somme was before them. I am not going to write about the cathedral, because all that can be found in guide books and tourists' journals, and will only tell you that Esther was very glad she had been brought to Amiens; she would not on any account have missed that hour in the glorious old church, the most stupendous and magnificent she had ever seen. Only if she could have cleared away from its many altars their fripperies of tawdry artificial flowers in gilt vases, and their flimsy lace draperies and vulgar knick-knackeries, to say nothing of the countless ends of candles lighted and unlighted before every shrine, and the very greasy stands on which they were arranged, which would have been a disgrace to any decent kitchen. But the chapel of the Virgin was simply decorated with lilies, chaste and beautiful, unmixed with any other flowers. And of course the wonderful tomb of St. Firmin, the patron saint of Amiens, was duly inspected and admired, and the tomb of St. John the Baptist was devoutly exhibited, though Esther never quite made out how the saint could have contrived to be buried at Amiens, which is certainly a long way from Jerusalem.

A little while and they were once more *en route*, Esther protesting with truly insular spirit against being shut up in the horrible *salle-d'attente*—a protest in which I unfeignedly join, since it is certainly very unpleasant to be locked up like a criminal or a lunatic while the train by which you purpose travelling stands waiting on the platform, and you know that finally you will have to rush out and scramble for seats in a fashion as undignified as it is uncomfortable. Whatever advantages foreign travel may boast, the incarceration of the *salle-d'attente* is certainly not one of them—very far from it indeed, as I think all Englishmen will confess.

But on they sped through the pleasant but unromantic country, and just as the sun was setting they stopped at the ugly little station of St. Denis, and then came the heights of Montmartre, and then the station or Embarcadère du Nord, and Paris was fairly reached.

Monsieur Eugène Bethune met the travellers, and soon

they were rolling along the lighted, crowded Boulevards, and past the Madeleine, across the Place du Carousel, over the Seine, and so into the Faubourg St. Germain, where the Bethunes lived. Once more under a ponderous gateway, opened by the *concierge*, and into a large paved quadrangle, and upstairs into a suite of brilliantly lighted rooms, and the long, exciting journey was over. Esther found herself under the roof which was to shelter her for she knew not for how long or how short a time, and the new life was all before her. But these Bethunes were the friends of Lancelot Digby; the Vérons he had never mentioned.

CHAPTER XLVII.

MISS TUCKER ASSERTS HERSELF.

BUT before Esther left Chilcombe there had been a regular battle at Guise. Fanny Tucker had emancipated herself, and my Lady Torrisdale was furious as a wronged pantheress. It all happened in this wise :—

The three ladies were sitting one morning in the conservatory, when Lady Torrisdale abruptly exclaimed, “Take yourself away, Fanny Tucker; I wish to speak with Miss Guise alone.”

Of course Fanny could do nothing less than obey, though Florence’s imploring looks entreated her to remain. She lingered as she went to pluck some heliotrope, and her patroness called out sharply, “Take yourself away a little more quickly, Fanny Tucker! Impertinent minx! And no eavesdropping, *if you please*.”

“Oh, aunt!” pleaded Florence, “you forgot that Fanny is a gentlewoman. And need she go away? We have not any secrets from her, I think.”

“I know what I am about, Miss Guise; I have something particular to say to you. If you don’t go quickly, Fanny Tucker, I shall come and shake you, you provoking girl!”

Exit Fanny, who considered that she was quite twenty years too old to be submitted to the indignity of shaking,

while Lady Torrisdale muttered—"She grows worse and worse; she is not half as docile as she was! She shows a spirit of her own, forsooth! and pretends to have an opinion! Guise has ruined her, that's a fact; but I'll soon bring her under again when I have her to myself! Now, Florence, sit down, my dear, and tell me all about it."

"All about what, aunt?"

"Why, all about young Uffadyne, to be sure. There's a screw loose there! Do you think I do not see it, and haven't seen it, ever since I came here? What's he going to do? I've a right to ask, for I am your mother's sister."

"I meant to tell you, but I did not wish just now to reopen the subject, which of course must be a very painful one. I have dismissed Mr. Uffadyne; the engagement is at an end."

"Mercy, child! you look as white as a ghost, and as grand as a tragedy queen! So you've given him his *congé*, have you? But what did you do that for?"

"He wished it. He had made a mistake, or we were both mistaken; to continue such an engagement was not to be thought of. It is all over, and I am making arrangements for going as quickly as possible to my own house at Little Guise. If you please, we will not talk about it; there are some things better not explained."

"I do not want any explaining; I understand it only too well. The young traitor! the heartless, black ingrate! But Florence, you are not really in earnest?—you only mean to punish him? You never intend that the engagement should be truly and altogether ended?"

"It is truly and altogether ended. I should be so glad, aunt, if you would not discuss it."

Lady Torrisdale lifted up her hands and her voice also.

"I never heard of such a thing!" she wailed out. "Ended! and he is the heir, and this place is his, and all the large estates, and goodness knows how much of your father's money! Why, in giving up Oswald Uffadyne you give up your own rights, you foolish child! You relinquish one of the *finest fortunes* in the country. I tell you he must not be given up; I shall go to him and tell him that he must and

shall stand to his word. It is enough to make your poor father turn in his grave !”

Florence turned very pale ; she had been hardly tried, and her aunt's foolish, provoking loquacity was just a little more than she could bear. She drew herself up haughtily, and replied : “Aunt, I must beg you to drop this conversation. And, remember, I *will not* brook any interference in this matter. If you go to Os——, to Mr. Uffadyne, as you threatened, it will put an end to anything like intimacy between you and me. I have dismissed him, and he is not to be recalled. In fact, he would not be recalled ; this is no mere lovers' quarrel ; we have both of us been utterly mistaken, and happily we have seen our error ere it was too late. Oswald does not wish to be my husband any more than I desire, or would consent, to be his wife. We are free both—as free as if there had never been any such covenant between us.”

“It is all that wretched girl, that base viper that you have warmed in your bosom—that impudent Esther Kendall ! She is a cunning young lady, and a very daring one too. She has everything to gain and nothing to lose, and she is content to risk everything in order to win the prize of a rich husband. I don't so much blame a girl for trying to do the best she can for herself ; but to think of her having the audacity to cast her eyes on Oswald Uffadyne, your betrothed lover, and you have been so good to her ! The impostor, the *thief*—she is nothing better—the wicked, brazen hussy !”

“Aunt, once more I declare that I will not continue this conversation. Only let me remark that in this matter Esther is quite blameless.”

“Stuff and nonsense ! Just as blameless as if she crept upstairs to your jewel-box and abstracted your most valuable diamonds. You dare not look me in the face and affirm that this Esther Kendall, who is nobody knows who, has not been the cause of all this flare-up between you and your cousin. She met him at the ruins that night. Ah, I know !”

“I know she did ; but I am weary of it, and I will not *talk* further ; and since you will not drop the subject I must *leave* you.”

Lady Torrisdale felt furiously angry, as she always did when she was baffled ; so, after a few minutes' reflection, she bounced out of the conservatory in search of Miss Tucker, resolved to indemnify herself for all disappointments and mortifications by worrying and bullying that unfortunate young woman to the last pitch of mortal endurance. She found Fanny upstairs, putting away some muslins just returned from the laundry.

"What did you mean, Miss Tucker," she began, scarcely waiting to regain her breath, "by setting me at defiance just now? What new impertinence, I wonder!"

"I do not know what you mean, Lady Torrisdale. I did not set you or any one at defiance ; but—but——"

"But what? Don't gasp like a fish out of water. And how dare you contradict me?"

"I may as well tell you at once, Lady Torrisdale, that I have decided to leave you. The duties of the situation are heavier than I can sustain ; my health and my spirits alike sink under the treatment I have so long received at your hands. Besides, you give me no salary, and it is quite time that I began to do something for myself."

"Oh, you wicked, ungrateful girl! Oh, what a wicked, ungrateful world it is! No salary, and I have spent pounds and pounds on you—far more than you were ever worth. I only kept you out of respect to my late lord, he being your mother's cousin. Salary indeed! who do you think will give you a salary, you good-for-nothing, shameful, most indecent girl?"

"I think I can secure one, though it may be only a small one. The truth is, Lady Torrisdale, I have borne my life till I can bear it no longer. I want my freedom, and I will have it."

"Hear her," cried her ladyship, appealing to a Turk's-head broom, which the housemaid had left in the chamber. "Freedom, indeed! what next? I suppose she wants to roam the country over with a set of strolling players—go on the stage, I daresay; act in a barn to gaping rustics, and play the castenets in a tight-fitting jacket and short petticoats. Oh, dear me, what is this world coming to! It grows wickeder and wickeder every day. I wonder you are

not afraid of some judgment coming upon you, Fanny Tucker. I should not be surprised if showers of thunderbolts came down the chimney. I wonder these oak boards don't open and swallow you up."

"We should fall into the library," said Fanny, calmly; "and the air does not feel at all like thunder to-day. But you quite understand, Lady Torrisdale; I leave you as soon as you can engage a young person in my place, and in no case do I return with you to France."

"I will engage no young person! A pretty thing, indeed, to be pestered with a strange young person at my time of life! No, no, Fanny Tucker! I'm not going to let you disgrace yourself. I know what is due to my lord's family. *Salary indeed!* It is because I have had so much consideration for your feelings as a gentlewoman that I have never given you a hateful, vulgar salary, which is only another name for *wages*. I would not insult you, a lady born and bred, with *salary*! I had too much delicacy, and this is my reward! Oh, you wicked, cruel girl!"

And Lady Torrisdale sat down, held her hand to her side, shook her head plaintively at the Turk's-head broom, panted for breath, drank some water with *eau de Cologne* in it, and then began again: "You'll be ready to go to Paris with me this day week, and, if you must have a salary, *why*, I'll give you one." But she groaned as she uttered the words; it would be dreadful to have to open her purse for an additional expense, only if Fanny did go—and she seemed strangely and terribly in earnest—she would never get any one so cheap again; and would she ever be able to find a lady-companion who would also discharge the duties of waiting-woman? It was most improbable; and she had no more poor relations who might be in need of protection and a home.

But Fanny answered, steadily, "I thank you, Lady Torrisdale, but I have quite made up my mind; I need a change, and, indeed, my arrangements are pretty nearly concluded."

"They shall be unconcluded, then!" screamed the angry dowager. "I will not permit you to go; I will exercise my authority—I will have you legally detained; you shall not go *trapesing* about the country by yourself, like a vulgar

shopkeeper's daughter or a washerwoman. I won't have it, I tell you!—*I won't!* Do you hear me, Fanny Tucker? *I won't, I say!—I swear it!* There now! Don't look at me in that way!—I shall go mad! Oh; you abominable creature!”

“Lady Torrisdale, I am very sorry to cause you so much uneasiness, but be assured I am not going to roam about by myself. Miss Uffadyne has procured me a situation, so I shall be under proper protection. I have no desire to indulge in any freaks, nor do I wish to cast aside any of the rational restraints which society imposes.”

“But I tell you I am going to keep you. You are my relation—my dependent—my property; if you run away I'll send a policeman after you!”

“It would be all in vain, Lady Torrisdale. I am not your relation; and, if I were, I am of age, and free of control. If I choose to go to America to-morrow, I may go; no one living has any right to forbid me. Do not be afraid; I believe I shall conduct myself respectably. Only understand it is all settled, and there can be no alteration.”

Lady Torrisdale proceeded to go into violent hysterics, which quickly alarmed the house. Virginie kindly administered copious external applications of cold water, and spoilt her ladyship's new crape and bugle *pélerine*.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

“I NEVER DID YOU JUSTICE.”

LADY TORRISDALE took herself off a very few days afterwards. She “washed her hands of Fanny Tucker,” she declared; and she required every one to register her remarkable previsions concerning that emancipated young lady. She alternately prophesied shame and beggary as the result of Fanny's escapade. Sometimes she was to end her days in Millbank Penitentiary, or in some parish workhouse. One hour she was informed that she would certainly “die on the tramp,” and the next she was solemnly warned to conceal her true name if ever she were taken up by the police.

authorities, or carried to any "home" or "refuge" for destitute and unfortunate women! Fanny could bear all this cheerfully, since the time of her deliverance was at hand—it even amused her to hear of the diverse fates preparing for her; but Florence could scarcely restrain her impatience, and if anything could alleviate the sharpness of the misery she was enduring it was the departure of the dowager, who one evening suddenly signified her intention of quitting Guise next day.

She went up early to her room, and was supposed to be occupied till deep into the night in packing her properties and the spoils she had accumulated. Fanny Tucker was not permitted to assist.

And next morning she actually left the house, with many more packages, the servants remarked, than had come with her from Boulogne; and, grimly saluting her niece, she whispered very audibly, "Good-bye, my love; I'm very sorry for you, but I really think you've brought it upon yourself—I do indeed; still I am very sorry that you should be *jilted*! Never mind, my dear, better luck next time, I dare say. Look out for snakes in the grass next time, eh! And you know the proverb, 'There's as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it.'"

Florence extricated herself from the unwelcome embrace as fast as she could; her cheeks were glowing, and her soft blue eyes flashing, but she made no rejoinder. What could she say to so insufferable a woman?

Then she denounced Fanny once more,—“all but *cussed* her outright, mum,” said a little eavesdropping kitchen-maid, when describing the scene to Mrs. Maxwell, who had held herself aloof from the exodus of Lady Torrisdale. Mrs. Maxwell hated her ladyship; “coming always for what she could get, and going about just like a cat on the prowl,” said the housekeeper afterwards to her old friend and adviser the butler; “and I hope, Mr. Soames, you looked well after your forks and spoons, for she'd no more mind putting a salt-spoon or even a cream jug in her pocket than I mind taking up this bit of bread. I've kept a sharp eye on the old china and those little bits of things that Miss Guise sets such store

by. Bless you, Mr. Soames, she's capable of anything ; and if she had happened to be a poor woman instead of a countess she'd have been before the magistrates long ago. People who are so keen after getting are never over particular as to how they get."

"That is to say, Mrs. Maxwell," said the butler, who was a phrenologist, "that persons having *acquisitiveness* largely developed are usually deficient in the organ of *conscientiousness*. I quite agree with you ; and between you and me, ma'am, the love of gain is a snare, whether it be in a peeress or a pauper."

"And not one of the servants, from myself down to the least kitchen-maid, has seen the colour of her money !"

No wonder that my Lady Torrisdale was unpopular at Guise Court, especially in the housekeeper's room and in the servants' hall. But now she was gone, and great was the peace of those who remained, although anxieties and deepest grief overshadowed them.

And now Florence began to find out that Fanny was a comfort, and to dread the day when they must separate. She had thought that nothing, after her aunt had left her, could either annoy or console her, but there was certainly something in Fanny's gentle ways and calm hopefulness and unexpressed sympathy that she could ill afford to lose, and that she did not like to miss.

"I wish you had never made the compact with Cecil," said Florence, a few hours after Lady Torrisdale's departure. "I really know very little about Mrs. Lester. She is very good I am sure, or my father would never have selected her to reside with me ; but she is almost a stranger to me. I have not seen her since I was quite a little girl ; besides, everything has changed since arrangements were made with her, and I am not at all sure she will like to find her office become permanent. She quite thought she would be at liberty next summer, and she is not by any means in needy circumstances, and will wish to return to her own family."

"But, dear Miss Guise, I am not old enough to be of any use to you in *that* capacity. If I went into society I should need a *chaperone* myself."

“I tell you what it is, Fanny, I begin to be quite tired of a great deal of the nonsense imposed on us by merely conventional laws. I do not mean I would overleap established barriers. No good ever comes of a woman rashly braving what is called ‘society’; for ‘society,’ if seriously outraged, is apt to become maliciously vindictive, and to occasion one much inconvenience. Besides, it is obviously a Christian duty not to give unnecessary offence. But I cannot see why two perfectly steady-going young women should not live together in the country. Such a life as I must needs live at Little Guise must be a very secluded one. I shall receive few visitors; certainly only those of my own sex, except indeed the clergyman of the parish, who is a married man, and with whom I hope to work happily; and I shall not go out at all, not for a long while at least, if ever; and why cannot it be that you and I manage our affairs together, and go on our way in peace, no man daring to make us afraid?”

“It might be. I would not be afraid if you were not. But then I have promised Miss Uffadyne, and I cannot go back.”

“No, no; you cannot. Cecil has been quite troubled enough about Esther’s resignation. But I am sorry nevertheless; I wish you had spoken to me first. Say what you will, you are too good for the place; neither am I sure that you and Cecil will work together harmoniously. Cecil is very good; nobody in Chilcombe is half so useful as she is, and her school and her Bible-classes are and have been most undoubted blessings. She thinks nothing of her own trouble, and she never consults her own convenience. If she were required to level a stone wall, she would batter at it, or peck patiently at it, till she had it down to the very foundations. She is hasty, but she tries to be just, and if she demands much from those about her she requires no less or rather more from herself. And she is very warm-hearted, and takes amazingly when she does take to any one. Oh, yes, she is very good and nice—truly excellent, you know—but *peculiar*. Nevertheless one is bound by one’s treaty; you must certainly keep faith with Cecil; and if after a time you feel that the work does not suit you, nor you the work, it will be

quite easy to change. Little Guise is only sixteen miles from Chilcombe, though it is quite across country."

The next day came Miss Uffadyne, driving herself in the little pony chaise. She and Florence had not met since the rupture with Oswald, and both felt that they trod upon very delicate ground. Cecil wondered whether Florence knew to what extent she had countenanced her brother in his proposals to Esther, and Florence wondered whether Cecil would not openly blame her for encouraging Esther to leave Chilcombe. Both cousins felt very uncomfortable when they were left alone together. Strive as she would against it, there was a sense of guilt on Cecil's mind which did not tend to set her at her ease. To be discomposed was a new experience to Miss Uffadyne, and she confessed to herself that she did not relish it at all.

"So Lady Torrisdale is gone?" began Cecil, when she was fairly seated.

"Yes; she went away yesterday morning. She is gone to London for the present."

"How glad you must be to be quit of her."

"Well, I must confess I am, though it sounds very bad to be glad of the absence of one's relations."

"I do not see that. If people do not assimilate they are best apart, whether related or not. Miss Tucker is here still, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes. Are you wanting her at once?"

"Well, Alice Chubb is not competent, that is a fact, and the girls do not take to her. Still, I may tell you, Florence, I am not at all confident about Miss Tucker; it came round somehow, but I felt that more or less I was going against my own judgment, and I never do that but I repent of it sooner or later. I cannot feel sure that this Fanny will be the right woman in the right place; she is too much of a fine lady."

"You mistake. Fanny Tucker is not at all a fine lady; she is unmistakeably a lady, far too much so to give herself airs, or to shirk her work because it is uncongenial. She will do *her duty in the school*, and her grace and high-bred *tone and her general culture* will do the girls no harm."

"I am not so certain of that. She cannot understand them nor they her."

"If you feel so much doubt, had you not better tell Fanny? Would it not be wiser to keep on Alice Chubb till you hear of some one really suitable?"

"No, no; I must stand by the engagement I have made. Miss Tucker would have every reason to complain of me if now that she is left without a home I hesitated about settling her in her post. Still I wish I had not been so premature, for I have heard from Mrs. Carden, asking me to look out for a young person in whom she takes great interest. She has been five years mistress of the British School at Frumpington, and is leaving for certain good reasons, which Mrs. Carden fully explains. She is anxious to get away from Frumpington, and she does not wish to be out of employment. She would be the very woman for Chilcombe."

"I think it may be arranged. Fanny Tucker will not mind if the present appointment be cancelled."

"If she were not who and what she is I would offer her a quarter's salary to be off the bargain, but of course that is out of the question. She is of our own order, and that is the mischief of it."

"Not at all; you will be obliging me by giving Fanny up. I want to keep her myself, at least for some time to come; and she would like to stay with me—to go with me to Little Guise, only she felt bound to you."

"If that really is the case—but you are sure that you are not proposing it in order to accommodate me?"

"Quite sure! It has been one great trouble that I must be alone with Mrs. Lester, whom I really do not know. I have a nervous shrinking from strangers, and it would be such a comfort to keep Fanny, whom I have learned to know and appreciate."

"Then I am sure you shall keep her. Even if the Frumpington woman should fail I would rub on with Alice Chubb, and Mary Murrell as pupil-teacher, till some one eligible turned up. I would do more than that for you, Florence; I feel as if I had wronged you—and yet——"

"You have not wronged me, Cecil—not in the least."

"Do you know that I tried to persuade Esther to listen to Oswald?"

"Yes, I know. I do not blame you if you thought it would be good for both. I told Esther myself that if she loved——*him*"—Florence always avoided Oswald's name when she could, it gave her a choking pain in the throat—"there was no reason why she should not in due time marry him. He never really loved me; he says so, you know; and now, of course, all is as much over between us as if it had never been."

"Esther will have it that it will all come right again."

"It never will; it cannot! Cecil, let me speak plainly to you once, and then we never need revert to the subject again. I did love your brother dearly—God knows how dearly. I thought he was to be my own husband, and I gave myself up to love him. And I love him still, for 'love is love for evermore;' but it is quite another sort of love I have for him now—a sort of solemn, compassionate love, into which no thought of self intrudes. I pray God to lead him and strengthen him, and make him happy; but the current of our two lives has divided never to mingle again. This new love is something sacred; I should feel it just the same if he had a wife. But the old love is killed; it was just as if it had been a living creature, which some one stabbed, and it died, and now it lives again in quite another form. I do not know if you understand me."

"I think I do, Florence. I have never done you justice. I am afraid I have encouraged Oswald to be unloyal all along. I did not like the engagement, because it was an affair arranged for you, so to speak. I should have liked Oswald to choose spontaneously the woman whom he would marry. But I never dreamed that Esther would attract him; her want of birth, and beauty, and culture, I should have thought would have been enough."

"Esther will be very beautiful one of these days; and, though not highly educated, she is not deficient in culture. *All her tastes are refined; she has great innate force of*

character, and remarkably vivid perceptions. I am not surprised that she should attract him."

"And you can forgive us all?"

"I had only *him* to forgive, and I have forgiven him, quite."

"And you do not suffer much?"

"Of that we will not speak. One cannot endure such a wrench and not feel the anguish of it; but I am not going to be miserable if I can help it. I seem now to be walking in a grey, sunless world; but the brightness will come back again in time. At any rate, there is the sure joy of the life of the world to come."

CHAPTER XLIX.

CECIL'S REPENTANCE.

THE week after Lady Torrisdale's departure, Miss Guise effected her own removal to Little Guise, and she and Fanny took up their residence in the new home, which was almost as strange to Florence as to Fanny, since in all her life she had but seen it twice, and that in her childhood, and each time for a few hours only. Guise Court had always been her happy home, and she had supposed until lately that it would be her home as long as she should live. "And now," she said to Fanny on the evening of their arrival, "I may never be there any more!"

No one guessed what it had cost Florence to leave the Court. Apart from all the sorrow inflicted by her faithless lover, it had given her the keenest pain to bid farewell to the house where she had been mistress so many years. There was the room in which she was born, and in which her mother died, and a little further on another room, in which she had listened to her father's last words, and pressed her last kiss on the lips that would never answer to hers again, however great her yearning or her need—"the mouth that kissed last kissed *alone*!"

The pictures, the cabinets, the very chairs and tables,

were as so many dear friends ; all had borne their part in the hallowed history of the past, and not one could be left without a pang that had in it some of the bitterness of death itself. And it was a sort of death which had come to Florence, for the life which had been hers was ended as entirely as if she had ceased to be. Behind her lay the warm sunshine, and the fragrant roses, the green pastures, and the still translucent waters giving back the golden rays of noon, and the pure silvery beams of night's celestial queen. Before her stretched one grey expanse of sea, and sky, and land ! She had come into a desert world, where all was dark, and drear, and cold, and comfortless. That which had been could never be again ; the hopes and joys of last year had melted away with the winter's snows, and could return no more than they. Her life's thread was broken short off ; would it ever again be interwoven with happy thoughts, and love, and joy,—*and trust ?*

Little Guise, in comparison with the Court, was scarcely more than a roomy cottage. Still it was a good house, and might have comfortably accommodated a large family. It had been put in excellent repair when let to a wealthy Bristol merchant several years before, and the gardens and conservatories had been carefully kept up. Had Mr. Guise any previsions of a day when this would be his darling daughter's only and permanent home ? Surely it was so ; for he had had the vinery repaired, and an orchard-house built. Two fine rooms had been added to the west wing, and a small paddock and a flourishing young spinney thrown into the ornamental grounds ; and it could scarcely be supposed that all this was done for the benefit of the Bristol merchant whom Mr. Guise never saw, and who became his tenant for a few months only, or for Florence's comfort for the one year which must elapse before her marriage.

Florence had received through Cecil a message from Oswald, a very humble and earnest entreaty that she would take with her to Little Guise whatever furniture, or plate, or household property she fancied. He did not intend to live at the Court himself, he sent word, and things would be *shut up with strange servants ;* for Mrs. Maxwell and Mr.

Soames declined remaining after Miss Guise's departure, and moth and rust would naturally corrupt, and very likely thieves would break through and steal, and the beautiful old house, with all its fine appointments, would sink into decay. He knew it was vain to ask her to stay there, in *his* house. He would give all he had if it were still hers and not his ! But would she not take the furniture, and the pictures, the plate, the valuable collection of antiques and articles of *virtu*, the stores of linen, which would be given over to mildew if left at Guise, the carved cedar chests, the old oak presses, the dragon china, and a host of other things old and new, which were set forth in a list given in *extenso* by Mrs. Maxwell and Mr. Soames conjointly. A perfect *catalogue raisonnée* it came to be, when fairly completed ; and it was handed over to the new master in due form, who, without reading a page of it, flung it into Cecil's lap, saying it was nothing to him, the things were none of his, save by legal fiction ; and Florence, if she would not stay at the Court, must take them away with her to Little Guise.

"You talk more like a child than a man," replied Cecil, gravely, as she turned over the numbered sheets of the bulky manuscript. "Of course she cannot stay on living in your house. You would insult her by asking it. A woman, even if she have small self-respect, must defer somewhat to the world's dictum on such delicate points, or be ostracised by society."

"It is my house, certainly ; but I am not going to live in it."

"It will seem very strange if you still make the Chenies your home ; it will look very much as if you had too evil a conscience to live at your ease at the Court."

"I was not thinking of the Chenies. I mean to go abroad almost immediately."

"Now, Oswald, I will not have you go persecuting my poor Esther. I wish you would understand that you have not the smallest chance with her. She has to thank you for banishment and expatriation. She never loved you, and now she regards you with something approaching to repulsion. I beg you will not molest her any further."

“Really, Cecil, you take a high tone ; and, besides, did you not *promise* me your advocacy, your whole-hearted adherence in the matter ? ”

“ I did. Whether in so promising I was right or wrong is not now of much consequence, for the case is hopeless. If I had seen that Esther really returned your affection, if I could have believed that her happiness depended at all upon becoming your wife, I would never have rested till every obstacle was removed, and the marriage honourably arranged. I would have openly acknowledged her as my future sister-in-law, caring nothing for the world’s approbation or deprecation of my conduct ; but when I find that Esther firmly refuses you, shrinks from you even, what is the use of persisting in my advocacy ? And as for your still pursuing her, I cannot think of anything more shameful, more cruel.”

“ Shameful ! when I would make her my dear and honoured wife ? Cruel ! when I go to pour out my heart’s love before her ? ”

“ But she does not want your heart’s love. Such love as yours is an awful infliction when it is not wanted. Any woman who is not a vain coquette must feel pain instead of pleasure when addresses which she can never entertain are pressed upon her. And can you not see that you may be doing her a real injury, without at all intending it ? You may so easily compromise her. What will the friends with whom she now is say, when they find that a lover follows in her train ? Would you deprive her of every friend she has ? You have separated her from Florence, and from myself, and from Mrs. King, who was as good as a mother to her. What more would you have ? Have you no compassion for a girl who is left alone in the world, with no defence against its slanders and censures but her own principle, and prudence, and innate delicacy ? ”

“ Cecil, I beg you will drop this tone. I have borne much from you ; but I declare to you I cannot, will not, bear much more. You speak to me as if I were a destroyer of innocence, as if I were one of those foul fiends in man’s shape, who go about seeking whom they may devour among

the young and beautiful. What have I done to merit such vile aspersions ? ”

“ Don’t talk nonsense. *I* asperse you, indeed ! If I thought you harboured any wicked designs against Esther, I would not contaminate myself by conversing with you. No, I acquit you of any such abominable villainy. I believe that Esther would be as safe with you as she would be with me, were she thrown on your protection.”

“ You do me no more than justice. If Esther were in my power I should only evince my appreciation of the fact by treating her with increased respect. A queen would not command more humble deference.”

“ I do believe you, Oswald ; but cannot you see how, in spite of the absolute purity of your own intentions, you may expose a girl, situated as Esther is, to most injurious comment ? Do you know you have done it already ? People in this village are coupling your name and hers. Mrs. King came to me this morning, blazing with indignation, to say that Belinda Smith’s mother had been setting it afloat that Esther was gone away in disgrace—dismissed, in fact, from the school for light conduct.”

“ The infamous woman ! I will make her prove her words.”

“ You will do nothing of the kind. You would only make matters worse. I will see Mrs. Smith myself, and Esther shall be righted as far as possible.”

“ As far as possible ? She must be fully and publicly righted, and at once too.”

“ I am not sure that it can be. It seems Mrs. Smith saw Esther and you at the ruins that night, and she affirms, and the neighbourhood I am afraid believes it, that you have been in the habit of meeting clandestinely for months. Mrs. Smith has some spite against Esther, it seems, on account of some punishment inflicted on Belinda. Mrs. Smith is one of those mothers who, though harsh themselves, almost to brutality, grow furious if any one presumes to exercise discipline upon their offspring. She beats the girl herself shamefully, but she was ready to beat Esther because she kept Belinda without her dinner one day in a case of

insubordination. Linda Smith, however, is very fond of Esther, and takes her part fearlessly ; but that does not restrain her mother's tongue, and now it is all about the village that Esther left Guise in disgrace, having been 'found out' by Lady Torrisdale, and that I at once dismissed her and sent her abroad to prevent further unpleasantness."

"That Mrs. Smith deserves ducking on the green. I should like to toss her into the muddiest pool."

"I dare say you would. But as that is out of the question, the best thing you can do is to keep silence, and leave me to fight Esther's battles. It is a sad thing when a girl's name is bandied about in this way ; it is like handling the bloom on the fresh ripe fruit, or brushing the down from the butterfly's wing. The plum is just as good as it was before, but it does not seem the same ; and the butterfly is not hurt, perhaps, but its beauty is dimmed, and its brilliant hues are for ever tarnished. You have caused sad mischief, Oswald Uffadyne ; you have wrought much evil among us, and all for want of a little prudence and self-control. But let bygones be bygones ; I do not want to distress you ; only let it all end here as far as you are concerned. Keep the Channel between yourself and Esther Kendall ; do not breathe her name, and, if possible, do not think of her."

"Not think of the only girl I ever loved ! Oh, Cecil !"

"You do *not* love Esther Kendall. Love may consist of passion and self-sacrifice, but of passion and selfishness—*never*. Such love as yours is a curse to the woman on whom it is bestowed. It is almost as fatal to her as that other foul and hateful thing that sometimes wears love's semblance, and of which we will not speak. Now I have no more time to waste in aimless conversation. What am I to do with this inventory ?"

"I wish it to be given to Florence. If she would take all and every article set down in it I would thank her from my heart. I should feel less like a supplanter—less like a *thief*."

"It is not likely that she will take even a stick which is not indubitably her own. Besides, what could she do with *such a heap of goods* ? Little Guise is already furnished,

from drawing-room settees and ottomans down to nutmeg-graters. I really believe my uncle thought it possible that Florence might have to live there altogether ; he never would have taken such pains with a place which she was only to occupy for the one year of retirement which must elapse before she could return to the Court as your wife. And if Little Guise were empty and bare, it would not hold a tithe of all these goods and chattels. I will have nothing to do with it, Oswald ; I will not be a go-between in this matter. Take back your schedule—inventory, whatever you may call it."

"You are extremely unsisterly ; you are unkind."

"Am I? I do not wish to be so. Oh, Oswald, you are all I have in the world, and I am so bitterly disappointed in you." And she burst into an agony of weeping which seemed irrepressible.

Oswald was fairly aghast ; he had not seen Cecil shed tears more than twice since he could remember, and once was when their mother died. Cecil was not a crying young lady ; at any rate people did not see her cry, and Oswald would rather have had her in a flaming passion or sulking for a week than weeping and sobbing thus like the weakest of her sex.

The end of it all was that Cecil had to go and lie down with severe nervous headache, and Oswald wandered about the house and grounds all the evening, disconsolately wondering what was to become of him. One moment he thought he would go back to Oxford and "rust" there, as Cecil would call it ; for, if he must rust, there could be no more respectable way of doing it. Then again he resolved to set out at once for Paris, find Esther, and plead his cause with such power that she must yield. Their marriage would effectually silence all the stupid tongues that that venomous Mrs. Smith had set a-going. And then he concluded to go to America, to Australia, to China, or to Palestine : a sort of "anywhere, anywhere out of the world" spirit fell upon him, and he cared not what became of him. Yet here he was, a young man of good family, with an unsullied name and a fair inheritance, lately betrothed to the loveliest heiress in the county—a scholar, a genius, blest with health and a hand-

some person, and with a balance at his bankers that made men's mouths water when they only guessed at it! All this! and a wretchedness as profound as if he were old, and poverty-stricken, and all alone in the world. There could scarcely be a more miserable man within twenty miles of Chilcombe, unless it were Cuddie Digby, who had always some bitter wrong to revenge, and who looked generally something between a muzzled puma and a rated hound. To think that the rich, handsome, clever, gifted Oswald Uffadyne, the young lord of lordly Guise, was in a position to bear comparison with such as he, the bosom friend of Red Giles and of the unpopular Mr. Fuggles!

But next morning, Cecil, looking very pale, informed him that she would go to Florence, and speak to her on the subject of the inventory. Cecil always felt humiliated before Florence now, and this errand would humiliate her still further, in her own eyes at least; but she accepted it as a part of the punishment due to her for her own unworthy conduct. For slowly the scales were falling from Cecil's eyes, and she saw herself in her true colours. Unwittingly she had been both traitor and mischief-maker! She could see now how first she had begun to be jealous of Florence, how she had always depreciated her, sometimes wilfully misinterpreting her, and never doing her justice; how, while she thought herself only doing her duty, only acting fairly, she had been quietly undermining her brother's affection for his betrothed; how she had striven to maintain to the full her long-established influence over Oswald, and how all that influence had really been antagonistic to the happiness of Florence Guise.

"Ah!" said Cecil to herself, as she was driving through the lanes to Little Guise, "what would I not give now to retrace the past—to undo some of the mischief I have done! For I shall always feel that I have been Oswald's enemy; it was I who first taught him to undervalue Florence, who first insinuated that the attachment between them was not of the right sort. If I had openly found fault with Florence it would not have been so harmful. I struck at her covertly; *I made myself believe that I was most just and honourable,*

giving her always her just mead of praise ; but faint and qualified praise is often more hurtful than open censure. That I had not in view the separation of Florence and Oswald, I am sure, and yet—and yet there never was a time since the engagement began when I should not have been pleased to hear of its dissolution. And now it has come, and I am grieved to the very soul. Cecil Uffadyne, you thought yourself the most sensible and practical young woman in the country, and you are a fool ! You did not know yourself ; you persuaded yourself that you were acting for the best, looking at things in a plain, common-sense light, and feeling always your great superiority over weaker and more sentimental natures. Well, I have found out that weakness does not always consist in talking nonsense, or in giving way to others ; and one may be very sentimental without falling in love, as people call it, and making one's-self ridiculous. I really don't know but that any amount of spooniness would be better than this intolerable conceit and arrogance which has led me into such a heap of mistakes, that I hardly know true from false, or right from wrong. My great sin has been the love of power, the love of rule, and the strong desire to be first with everybody with whom I was associated, and in everything in which I was concerned. I thought I reasoned so well ; I fancied my judgment was so excellent, so calm, and so dispassionate ; I felt that I was born to influence others for their good. It was I who was to be Oswald's guiding star, his truest friend and mentor ; and now I find that I have influenced him only for evil, and that I am powerless when I would turn him back into a safer path. One should well count the cost before one begins to urge another into any special track ; it is only God who can say, ' Hitherto shalt thou come, and no farther ! ' ”

And so Cecil went on reviling herself as the ponies took their way, without much guidance of hers, over the solitary hills to Little Guise. Cecil was just one of those ardent people who can neither praise nor blame by halves, and the measure she gave others she fully meted out to herself ; she *had* relied so much upon herself, she had scarcely ever questioned the wisdom of her opinions ; she had lived in an

atmosphere of delightful self-complacency and self-applause ; and now she had fallen down, as it were, from a seventh heaven of internal satisfaction into the nethermost depths of self-accusation and self-distrust. Accordingly she gave herself credit for having done more mischief than she could be reasonably charged with. Oswald's want of stability would probably have manifested itself sooner or later, even had Florence been Cecil's idol and paragon from the beginning ; though at the same time it is quite possible that Florence's influence, if it had not been stealthily undermined, might have kept him steadfast on points where Cecil was powerless.

As once the tortoise distanced the hare, slow and steady winning the race, so also the gentler, softer nature sometimes reaches first the goal, and triumphs over the stronger, more impetuous temperament.

Cecil reached Little Guise at last. It looked pleasantly enough in the autumn sunshine, nestling among the grey hills, and half embosomed in its woodland screen, which showed now of all brilliant and vivid hues ; for there had been one or two biting night frosts, and the lime-trees were almost bare. But russet-brown, and orange, and ruddy tints were on the other trees ; the birch-tree drooped its long tresses of rich gold, and the mountain-ash was glowing with its clusters of pure coral berries. The clematis was still flowering, though its branches flaunted rather untidily ; the *noisettes* were yet in bloom, and the Virginian creeper flamed like a royal banner in the mellow, softened sunshine.

Florence, though no longer mistress of Guise Court and lady of Guiseley, was by no means poor ; that was one comfort. Even now, she was more wealthy than Cecil herself, for Cecil's fortune, though ample, was nothing like so large as it was reported to be, though the Chenies was her own, settled upon her when it became evident that Oswald was to inherit Guise Court and the estates of Guiseley.

She was rather startled when she saw Florence — she was looking so exceedingly ill ; she seemed languid and shivery, and inclined to lie down by the fire, with the Afghan

wrapped about her. And for once Cecil did not think it her duty to chide, or to invite her to an effort which was evidently painful. Mrs. Lester had arrived, and she was greatly concerned to find her charge in such weak health, and she had proposed an immediate journey to town, but Florence refused to leave the country. She was too tired, she said; she must "*rest*" — she only needed rest: medical advice was altogether needless. She could not make a second change while she was still suffering from the effects of the first; she would rally if left quietly to herself, and the more quickly the less she was disturbed.

"My dear Florence, you never told us you were ill," said Cecil, when she was left alone with her cousin.

"I'm not ill, only so dreadfully tired, and so miserably chilly. I think Little Guise must be very cold, though Fanny will have it that it is warmer here among the hills, and sheltered as we are, than it was on the high ground at Guise Court. I do not know how it is, but I am never comfortably warm unless I am snug in bed, with the eider-down quilt tucked round me."

"You are not cold now; your hands are burning."

"Oh, that is because I am a little feverish; I have a cold upon me. I feel shivery in myself. Do stir the fire, please."

"Flossy, you *are* ill! you must have advice. Mrs. Lester had better go up to town with you."

"She has already proposed that, and I have refused. And I mean to be firm—I am going to be obstinate indeed; nothing shall take me away from Little Guise this winter. Why, I am only just settled here."

"What does that matter when your health is at stake?"

"My health will be all right after a time, Cecil, but not just yet. Nature is taking a little revenge, I suppose; she always does in such cases. After any extraordinary trial of one's strength and nerves there is sure to come a period of reaction. I am not well, I know, but I only want quiet and rest. I cannot talk much, nor think much. If I can only lie here undisturbed I shall soon get better."

"I am not sure of that. Florence, it is your duty to see

a medical man," said Cecil, falling into her old preaching tone ; then, catching herself up—"I mean that it would be such a relief to us who care about you to know certainly that there are no grounds of fear."

"Fear of what?"

"Fear of serious malady, which, if neglected too long, might fasten upon you, and—and—prove dangerous, you know."

"And end fatally! That is what you mean, is it not? Well, I think life is a gift to be cherished, and I shall do all I can to prolong mine; but I see nothing so terrible in death. Who dreads the quiet, cool evening, after the sultry, busy noon? Who fears the shadows and the silence of the night, after the glare and turmoil of the day? If it be God's will, I am not afraid to go to Him. If he will comfort me, and give me rest so, why need I fear? 'For so He giveth His beloved sleep.'"

"Florence, don't; I cannot bear it. We—yes, *we*, for I have helped—we have made life a burden to you, and you are glad to lay it down. We have taken all your sunshine, and you are glad to close your eyes on a grey world, from which all the brightness has vanished."

And Cecil gave way again to violent weeping; she was thoroughly unhinged, and her vehement self-reproach was almost more than she could endure. Patiently and calmly she could *not* endure it. After all, it was a question which was the stronger hearted, she or Florence.

But her weeping disquieted Florence, as it had disquieted Oswald; and Florence had little strength to bear excitement. She lay back on her cushions, with her cheeks very pink, but gasping for breath; while Cecil knelt by her side, clasping one hand tightly, and burying her face in the Affghan, and sobbing as in unutterable anguish.

"Don't Cecil!" said poor Florence, faintly; "it is more than I can bear now, and—and—I really cannot understand you."

But Cecil wept on unrestrainedly, and Florence grew more and more excited, till Fanny Tucker, quietly entering the room, and seeing the state of affairs, interfered.

Fanny saw further than most people. She had lately put a few things together, which led her to a tolerably clear comprehension of Cecil's feelings towards Florence. She did not quite understand this utter abandonment of grief, but she knew that Miss Uffadyne was remorseful now that her brother and her cousin were finally separated, and she could see that Cecil was giving way to her feelings, to Florence's great detriment. For several days she had been keeping her as quiet as possible, guarding her from Mrs. Lester's rather officious kindness, and trying to divert her mind in every way that she could think of. And here was Cecil undoing in five minutes the thoughtful consideration of a week!

Fanny had learned to resist Lady Torrisdale, and she was not afraid of the clever, patronising Miss Uffadyne. She went up to her and touched her shoulder, saying, in a tone of peculiar, quiet firmness, "Miss Uffadyne, come away; you are doing Florence harm. Rise, if you please, and come away."

The light but steady touch, and the gentle yet commanding voice, roused Cecil; and she rose, feeling more humiliated than ever. Florence had not even understood her penitence, and she repelled her sympathy.

Fanny stood uncompromisingly waiting till Cecil should quit the room, and Cecil, weakened and hysterical herself, and terrified at Florence's closed eyes and paled cheeks from which all the pink had faded, was fain humbly to obey. Never had she felt so beaten as when she followed Miss Tucker into the library, and sat down in the easy chair, and took the port wine which was offered her, and in all respects obeyed as simple as a child. It was Cecil's first experience of submission for many and many a day; it seemed so strange to yield, and yet she knew she had no choice; besides, was it not right that her new humility should be tested? What were words without action? And of what avail were penitential tears unless self-discipline ensued? So it came to pass that Cecil humbled herself, and acknowledged to Fanny how thoughtless she had been, and begged to be allowed to see Florence again before she left.

Fanny would willingly have kept the two apart, but Florence herself desired that Cecil might return to her ; and so there was no alternative. And then Cecil bethought herself of the business upon which she had come to Little Guise. How now could she introduce it ? for she perceived that Oswald's name was a sound interdicted in that house.

But she held the inventory in her hand, and presently Florence asked her what it was. A little the wiser for her recent experience, Cecil guardedly explained. Florence's colour rose again, and her fingers played nervously with the fringe of the Affghan.

After nearly a minute's silence, she said, " Am I to understand that your brother sends it to me ? "

" Yes ; he begged me to bring it. At first I refused, but he pleaded hard, and so I relented. And now, Florence, let me say it at once : I know that you owe us nothing that you should yield your wish to ours or consult our happiness, but if you would do what we ask—as a favour, as a very great and undeserved favour—we should be so very much the happier ! "

" Do not ask me, Cecil ; I cannot ! Could you yourself, were you in my case ? "

" Candidly, perhaps not ; but you are better than I am, Florence. You have not my pride and self-esteem to combat with. And—poor Oswald has not lost all sense of honour ; he cannot bear Guise—he fells himself an usurper, a supplanter, almost a thief ! If you would only take as many of the things as you care for, if you would only select ! I know it is foolish to ask you to take all, but there must be some things you would like."

" I have everything that I care for specially. I did bring away much that is not included in this list, all that I felt was personally mine ; also everything that was in my own bedroom and my boudoir papa said I was to count as absolutely my own, as well as certain articles of plate, china, and jewellery. I remember he said to me one day, half in fun, as it seemed, and half in earnest, ' I have mentioned these things in case you chose to run away from Guise ; and even if you do not, I should like them to be your separate

property, to do with exactly as you please.' So about these things, which were all distinctly specified in papa's will, you know I could feel no hesitation."

"Nor need you feel any hesitation about anything else not thus specified."

"Thank you, Cecil, but I must! I cannot take the smallest thing that by law belongs to your brother. Nay, I do not want anything: this place is beautifully furnished, everything has been thought of, apparently. It is as perfect as the Court in its way, and I really believe I have brought with me all I could not bear to leave behind me."

"It must have been a cruel trial, leaving Guise!"

"Yes! but we never know what we can bear till we are tried," said Florence in rather a hard voice. Every now and then there was a ring, a sort of jar in her tones, naturally so sweet and soft, that Cecil never remembered to have remarked before. Certainly Florence was much altered since her father's death.

"Then you will not look through the inventory?" said Cecil once more. She felt the indelicacy of urging the question, but she was so unwilling to go back to Oswald and tell him that she had been entirely unsuccessful.

"Please not to say any more about it," said Florence, moving restlessly. "Oh, Cecil, if you knew now weary I am, how I want to put aside all regretful thoughts of my old life, you would spare me any further reference to it. If you care at all about me, please say no more."

"I do care for you very much, Flossy. I care for you now as I never did before, for I see how good you are, and also how strong."

"No, no. I am not strong; I am too tired to be anything but weak. After a little while it will be otherwise, I hope. I am not going to be an idler because the work that I have been used to is taken from me. But I am glad you care for me, Cecil; I once thought you did not."

"You might well think so, Florence! I have learnt a lesson. I will never trust myself again. I will never more put my opinion before all other people's, as I have done. I meant to do right. You must see that I am naturally fond

of managing and patronising, and I thought I must help in the arrangement of everybody's business ; and I did mean to be of use, but I have done only mischief."

"Cecil, what have you done? You speak as if you had done me some great wrong, of which I know nothing."

Then Cecil made full and free confession. She had not *done* anything, and she had said little ; but her silence had been meant for disapproval. Her faint praise she knew had been worse than hearty blame ; it was her tone, rather than her words, which suggested censure. "You see," she said at last, "I was jealous of you. I had had Oswald all to myself, and when I found you came first, I am afraid I began to entertain all sorts of petty spite against you. And at the same time I told myself that I was superior to any such unworthy sentiments. I did not like the engagement, so I made believe to myself that for both your sakes I could not wish it fulfilled ! I put down everything to the score of duty. Now I see that what I called sound discretion and sisterly anxiety was nothing but spite and jealousy and wicked temper. Oh, Flossy, there is no deceiver like a self-deceiver !"

"Cecil, my dear, I am glad you have said all this ; but you need not reproach yourself so bitterly. If—he—had truly loved me, all you could have said or left unsaid would have been ineffectual to part us. He *never* loved me, and I loved an ideal that never existed. Your brother, as I now know him, is a person whom I could not marry, if he came back to me to-morrow. My friend of old time, the *myth* I called Oswald Uffadyne, is dead and buried ! Let us not revive his memory, nor vex his ghost to haunt me. There, dear, do not look so sad ; it will all be for the best ; 'it will all come out right at last,' as that American book says ; only, please, when we meet let us talk of other things. How does the Frumpington young woman suit you ?"

"The Frumpington woman is not young. I should say she is almost forty. And I cannot tell what to make of her. She has strong opinions, which she expresses strongly, and she has a '*system*' of her own. I am going to let her try it."

I shall not interfere unless I see that things are going wrong. Her religious views, too, are queer."

"Is she not of the Church of England?"

"She is of no church at all, it seems to me. I charged her with being a Plymouth Sister, but she denied it with some indignation."

"Dear me! I hope she is not a female Jesuit."

"She looks a little like one, in her scanty petticoats and spectacles. I shall watch closely but quietly."

CHAPTER L.

A VISIT PROJECTED.

BUT Florence did not get better, although she was left quiet and undisturbed at Little Guise, and though Fanny watched over her and nursed her with all the tenderness of a sister. The autumn was passing into winter, and the alternations of weather from sharp and windy to damp and mild were more than usually trying to any one in delicate health. Florence took cold perpetually, in spite of every precaution, and cold upon cold, though not severally severe, reduced her strength, and depressed her spirits greatly.

One grey November day she seemed worse than usual; she complained of head ache and increased lassitude, and she was evidently disinclined for reading or conversing.

Fanny began to feel extremely anxious on her account. It was not a day to improve one's spirits; it had rained all night, and everything was dripping with moisture; the grey sea melted away into the greyer sky, and the grey hills, cloud-veiled and misty, seemed lost in the deeper shadows of the woods and valleys. The garden itself looked wretched and forlorn; the lawn was soaking, the evergreens hung with rain-drops, and the chrysanthemums and asters that were to have brightened the borders till Christmas drooped on withered and unsightly stems. An unexpected frost had shrivelled and blackened all the late autumnal flowers, and robbed the *parterre* of every lingering grace of the sweet

vanished summertime. It had been a very lovely summer, but a most sad one for nearly all the persons with whose concerns this story has to do.

Florence sat gazing out on the cheerless prospect; Fanny suggested that they should go on with the book they had in reading; it belonged to Mudie's set, and would soon have to be exchanged.

"I do not think I can read to-day," said Florence, wearily. "Finish the story yourself, Fanny, and tell me about it afterwards; you are the most successful *conteuse*, you know."

"But you will grow so weary, looking out on that grey sea and heavy sky, and those wet, miserable woods. It is not good for you, dear; it will give you sad thoughts."

"I don't know that it can make them sadder than they are. Fanny, I am afraid I am what is called giving way. I know I am wrong, and yet I cannot help it; I believe a downright scolding would do me good."

"And I do not believe in scolding under any circumstances; perhaps because I have had so much of it, and it has failed to benefit me in the smallest degree. Lady Torridale used to say at the end of one of her orations, 'But you are incorrigible, Fanny.' No! you must not be scolded, neither must you sit there brooding over your own sad thoughts. Rather tell them, if you do not mind; it is often good to speak out, and I think you trust me."

"To be sure I do, Fras. But what right have I to burden you with my sorrowful spirit? It is only the old story over again. I am thinking how this grey, sad day is in accordance with my life, cold, and colourless, and desolate. I, too, can say—

" 'Yet rose my morn divinely bright,
Birds, dews, and blossoms cheered my way.'

Will there be no light till evening time, think you, Fanny?"

"Florence, dearest, there should be light now in your own heart. Wait and trust, and sunshine will break out once more."

"It seems now as if it could not be."

"And it seems now as if that sea could never glitter again

beneath any cloudless sky ; as if those woods could never rustle their leaves any more in soft, balmy southern breezes ; as if flowers could never spring afresh from those bare, naked stems. Yet it will be, though not yet awhile. As surely as there is a sun behind those leaden clouds there will come a time of brightness, and beauty, and melody. The waves will dance and glitter, the lark will sing, the woods will be green again, and flowers will bloom about us. So, Florence, dear, your summer will return ; only be patient and trust God. He knows what He is doing, and how you are feeling, and He loves you."

"Fanny, I am afraid I have been losing faith in God, quitting my hold of Him, and that is why I am so desolate."

"I think we all lose faith sometimes, or rather we seem to lose it ; but I have found that those very seasons of apparent distrust have really deepened and strengthened my faith. I have found always that God is faithful and true to His promises, though I am weak and faithless, and it ends in my looking less to myself and clasping His hand more closely."

"Ah ! I have been letting go that clasp."

"And if you have, He has not."

"I feel so like a tired child who has been naughty, Fras."

"I know that feeling, Florence ; the only thing is just to give one's-self up like a child, and say, 'My Father, here I am, way-worn and weary ; do with me as Thou wilt.' The very act of faith gives patience, and of patience is born joy and renewed hope."

"Fanny, forgive my asking you, have you ever had a trouble of this sort ?"

"I have indeed, and very sore trouble it was. Even now I could not talk about it, and there are some things that are better never talked of. But I have known the very extremity of this sort of sorrow."

"I thought so, because you seemed to understand it so well. You have been so tender, and yours is the only sympathy which has never wounded me. I was sure you knew how it felt. Fras, can it never come right ?"

"I think never. I try not to think of it. I ought not to

repine at anything now ; all is so changed since you took me to live with you. The old life was so very, *very* wretched, that I cannot think how I bore it so long."

"And you are really happy now?"

"As far as myself is concerned ; I cannot be altogether happy, you know, when you are not. Flossy, dear, won't you try to take all the joys that are left to you, and be quietly, calmly happy? See what a blessing you may be to all about you."

"I have thought of that. That work is an excellent tonic I am sure, but I scarcely see what to do ; I cannot work merely to pass away time. I might paint a little, perhaps, but I am tired of books just now, and the piano gives me the heart-ache worse than ever the moment I touch the keys. Then among the poor there seems so little to be done here. In the first place, there are scarcely any that are really poor—only a few labourers' families, that are well looked after, I am told. We have a working clergyman, and his wife is a regular busy bee in the parish. She has excellent health, and she has no children and plenty of money, and evidently likes doing most things single-handed. I am afraid there is no opening here, and I am sorry for it, for I like to visit among the poor, and we always get on well together."

"But, Florence, *il y a des pauvres et des pauvres*, you know. I feel as if it were your mission, perhaps, to help the poor of our own order."

"Of our own order? Poor ladies and gentlemen, do you mean?"

"Exactly. I sometimes think what we call 'genteel poverty' is harder to endure than that absolute want which sends people out to tell their piteous tale. The very poor are used to poverty—I do not mean it unfeelingly—and they are not ashamed of it ; neither is it any pain or humiliation to them to take alms, especially if kindly tendered. It is the poverty that hides itself, that toils and toils in vain to keep up a little decency, and to maintain a few of the old observances, which seem all that link it to past time ; the poverty that shrinks from notice, that will, if need be, wear a smiling face, though the wardrobe be threadbare and the cupboard

all but empty ; that finds fewest helpers, and yet needs help most sorely. I speak feelingly ; I have known such poverty."

"Dear, dear Fras, I know that Lady Torrisdale treated you most unkindly, but I never knew that you were really *poor*."

"All my childish recollections are of bitter, stinging poverty, and of weary struggles to conceal it. My poor mother, you know, married without the sanction of her family, and they never forgave her. My father died and left us in Paris all but penniless. Oh ! how bravely my poor mother bore on. She did fine needlework ; she arranged artificial wreaths, or mounted real flowers for the florists ; she sketched and she painted ; she coloured printed engravings for illustrated books ; she did everything and anything to keep me from want, and to supply me with a few comforts. But it was hard work, and sometimes she could not get payment in ready money ; she was told to send in her bill next week or next month, when perhaps we were at our wits' end to keep the *pot-au-feu* going for one day longer. But that a neighbour taught us all the mysteries of cheap French cookery we should certainly have come very near to starvation. Thank God, we never were tried with that grim phantom at our doors, but many a time when I was a growing girl I have longed in vain for a nice sufficient meal, and I have had to stay indoors because I had no shoes, and to keep in the miserable *grènier*, *au sixième*, in which we lived lest people should guess how very poor we were. I suppose it was pride, and yet I hardly know. No one knows what it is to be of gentle birth and breeding, and yet to be short of actual necessities ; to be conscious of shabby dress, and of making shabby bargains, and to be mixed up with people who are good enough, perhaps, but vulgar and ignorant, and generally inquisitive and rude, according to our code of politeness, of which they can know nothing. Only they know who have experienced it."

"But it must be very difficult to help people so sadly situated ?"

"So difficult that not one person in five hundred is fitted

for the task. Now it seems to me that God has given you rare gifts, which specially qualify you to be the helper of such unfortunates. You have a natural delicacy which would prevent you from outraging or wounding other people's feelings ; you have great sweetness and frankness of manner, and you have such a nice way of putting things. I feel your exceeding kindness to myself, yet you never make me feel under obligations ; you do not remind me of your favours ; I am aware of them, and I am most grateful, but they are never a burden to me. I never feel constrained to say, ' Oh, that I could do without them ! ' ”

“ My dear Fras, I do you no particular kindnesses ; and as for favours, I am sure there are none except what I receive from you. We are more than quits ; for if you have a pleasant home with me, you make that home to me endurable. You are all the sunshine I have, and when I reckon up my mercies—I do sometimes, though I am so repining and rebellious—I place your coming to me just when I needed you, foremost among them.”

“ That is it ; you do kindnesses to people naturally and unconsciously. But to cease speaking of myself, there is Esther Kendall ; you have made her quite a different creature.”

“ Ah, poor Esther ! I think I see her now in her old tattered alpaca dress, her hands grimed with hard work, her face sullen and heavy from oppression and insult, and her splendid dark eyes that were always beautiful and beaming with intelligence, though sometimes she has come to me nearly desperate, and looking like a hunted animal that is not sure whether it will lie down and die, or turn and stand savagely at bay.”

“ Who is Esther Kendall ? ”

“ Just Esther Kendall, I suppose ; I know no more. I never imagined there was any mystery about her ; her own people must have been of the better sort. In all her dirt and rags—yes, comparative dirt and rags, of course, for she was shockingly untidy—in all her ignorance and self-abandonment, there was something in her which surprised me. She spoke like a lady, and while doing the tasks of a common servant *she never looked like one* ; she was naturally refined and

intellectual in her tastes ; she needed but the merest touch of a helping hand to set her on her feet. But it was my dear father who first really learned to know Esther ; her debt of gratitude, if there be one, is to him, not to me."

"The Hellicars must be dreadful people."

"They are indeed ; we should have come away after Esther left, but dear papa wanted to be often at Lincoln's Inn, and about the Courts of Law, and we were expecting continually to get home. Once we did give notice, for our patience was just exhausted, so much neglect and carelessness, and so much vulgar pretence, and absolute dishonesty. But Mrs. Hellicar came and cried and pleaded, and said if we left a distress would be put into the house ; so we stayed on till papa's business was concluded. I often wonder how Mr. York could have taken such lodgings for us. But the neighbourhood suited, dingy as it was ; even then papa could not bear much locomotion, so it would never have done to go to the West-end, as was at first intended. Besides, we found Esther."

"And do you still think that was a blessing ?"

"I do. Good must come out of it ; good has come out of it. We were so manifestly sent to her assistance, I feel so sure it was on her account that God directed our steps to Queen Square, that I am certain we are still, if we both live, to be a blessing to each other. Esther is as true as gold : she has been proved, and the proving has nearly broken my heart ; but I cannot blame her, for no blame attaches to her. Even Cecil can find nothing against her ; no one could have behaved more nobly."

"No, indeed, nor more delicately. Who would think she was related to the Hellicars ?"

"She is not ; it is only a connection by marriage. But Mr. Hellicar himself comes of a good family, I believe. Want of straightforwardness has been his ruin, I fancy. Papa used to say he was a man without a moral backbone, and Esther says he has no bones in his character at all."

"I know precisely the sort of man you mean : be he the son of a peer or of a rag and bone dealer, the end is pretty nearly the same. But what is he to Esther ?"

"Her uncle-in-law merely. His first wife was a Miss Kendall, and that dreadful Dick is really her cousin. The children by the second marriage are in truth no relations of hers, and Mrs. Hellicar is her aunt simply by courtesy."

"I understand. And I understand too what it must have been to her to escape from so much vulgarity and moral contagion into a purer atmosphere. And now, *apropos* of all this talk about genteel poverty and its victims, I want you to help somebody. I know I may ask you."

"Of course you may. It will do me all the good in the world to be of use to somebody, though that is surely a selfish motive. Who is it I am to help?"

"The Digbys of Helmsley Grange."

"My dear Fanny, impossible! I know they are poor, worse than poor—they are in debt. But they are very proud, and I have no more right to offer aid to them than they have to press it upon me. The Digbys and the Guises always stood side by side; and if you come to ancient family and *le sang pur*, and all that sort of thing, I am afraid the Digbys stand first. I am very sorry for them, but what *could* I do?"

"You visit them?"

"Oh, yes, occasionally. That is, I call on Mrs. Digby and Edith now and then; they have not been here—I mean to Guise Court—for years, because they have no carriage, poor things! I saw Lancelot, though, frequently in the summer—he was lodging on Templemoor; and I saw Rupert once or twice. I have never seen Cuddie since he was a shocking, ill-favoured lout of a boy, with a most sullen and malicious temper."

"You have not seen Edith lately, I think?"

"It is some months since I saw her; I met her once in Chilcombe village soon after our return. Esther told me a great deal about her—how she worked for the family, and tended all those wearifu' bairns, and nursed her rather silly stepmamma, and was always bright and cheerful. Esther found her charming."

"So she must be, if half that is said about her be true. But she is extremely unwell now—over-worked, no doubt."

I heard about her the other day when I was at Chilcombe. She has no actual malady, they say, but she has lost her appetite and cannot sleep ; she is very nervous, and, what is worst of all, she is taken with sudden fainting fits."

"Oh, that is serious. Could we get her here for a little while, do you think?"

"That is just what I was wishing. That would be a kindness indeed—a help they could not resent. It is not always with money, or with gifts of any sort, that people—especially such people—are most fully helped. You will only propose a visit between equals. It stands to sense that the poor girl needs rest and quiet and a little nursing, which she cannot have in that noisy, busy, and *poor* household."

"We will go to-morrow, Fanny, and try if we cannot bring her away with us. Oh, I am so glad you thought of it! I fancy a little nursing would do me good now ; I am tired of being nursed, and I could not ask you or Mrs. Lester to fall ill for my benefit. Change of air and scene, and perfect rest and quiet and generous living, must be what she wants—poor, good, uncomplaining Edith! Yes, we will go to-morrow, if the weather be at all propitious ; it does not matter about my cold, for it is all one whether I sit at home or go abroad."

"Mr. Maurice said driving on a mild day would do you good."

"And I will wrap up well. And, Fanny, perhaps we might go to the Grange and settle about Edith's visit, and then go on to Chilcombe and stay with Cecil all night ; she is quite alone now. And next day we could take up Edith—it would not be so sudden—and come back here again."

CHAPTER LI.

OVER THE HILLS.

THE next day was propitious ; and when Florence looked out on the grey morning, wondering whether it would be within the limits of prudence to take the proposed journey to

Helmsley, she saw that the wind had changed, and though a soft haze hung upon the hills, and brooded over the sea, there was every prospect of an unusually fine November day.

At ten o'clock Florence was up and dressed, and Fanny and she were settling at what hour the carriage should be ordered round.

"In an hour's time, I say," said Fanny; "thus we shall have the very finest portion of the day, and all the sunshine, if there should be any; it will take us the best part of three hours to get over the hills to Helmsley, for your horses, though in excellent condition, are certainly a little lazy. Then there is the drive to Chilcombe. I suppose there is no question about our being able to remain at the Chenies all night? for I really think the double journey is what you ought not to undertake."

"We can certainly stay. Cecil is sure to be at home, and quite alone, and she will be very glad to have us."

"Her brother has set out then?"

"Surely! or I should never have dreamed of going near Chilcombe. I heard from Cecil several days ago, and she told me that Mr. Uffadyne was already at Marseilles."

"He makes some stay at Alexandria, does he not?"

"Yes, I think so; he will wait for some of his old Oxford friends either there or at Cairo, and then they are going up the Nile together, visiting the Pyramids and Philæ, of course intending to penetrate as far as Nubia. Afterwards they will cross into the Desert, stop at Sinai, and diverge to Petra; and finally explore the Holy Land, the Valley of the Jordan, Damascus, Lebanon, etc. Then I believe they return home by way of Beyrout."

"What a magnificent programme! I wonder Miss Uffadyne did not go too. She is so thoroughly a woman of resources, and so entirely self-reliant, that she could not be afraid of possible dangers or discomforts. And it must be very dull for her, all alone at the Chenies at this dreary time of the year."

"I believe she thought it her duty to stay at home because of her school; at least that is the reason she gave when refusing her brother's entreaties that she would join the

party, which includes two or more married ladies. I am not sure but that she had other reasons."

By eleven o'clock the carriage was at the door, and the friends drove away, the opal-tinted haze lifting itself from the hills as they approached them. By the time they reached the high downs only a few snowy, fleecy clouds flecked the clear blue sky, and the sea sparkled in the glad-some sunshine, every little dancing wave rising and falling in a shower of brilliants. And beneath, nestling among its beautiful shrubberies, and sheltered by the friendly woods, lay the fair homestead of Little Guise.

"Ah, what a joy the sunshine is!" said Florence, looking forth on the wide, lovely prospect. "And all this breadth of view gives one a delicious sense of freedom. I feel better already, Fanny."

"I knew you did. I saw it in your eyes, and there is a healthy glow on your cheeks quite unlike the pink flush that has troubled us so much of late. Yes, the sunshine does make a great difference!"

"Still, I can fancy how one would weary of the glare and the heat in those sunny lands, where there is scarcely ever either mist or cloud. Even in our own hot summers one rejoices sometimes in a calm grey day. Extremes of condition are not good in the natural world any more than in the spiritual."

"And we never have them for long together. God gives us in our lives summer and winter, sunshine and shadow, according to His good pleasure."

"And it is His pleasure always to do us good?"

"Always, always. We both feel that I think. We both feel quite sure of our Heavenly Father's love and care. However we may fail and lose faith, and so of necessity lose peace, He never fails us, never changes, never quits His hold on us. Florence, don't you feel sometimes as if your heart would burst with gratitude, with love and praise to our Father who is in heaven?"

"I have felt so, but of late it has been far otherwise. It is so easy to praise when one has all one wants; even the birds sing in the golden day. But it is in the grey day,

when the world is cold and dim, and one's life to come seems all one colourless waste, and the heavy hours drag on, and the evening, dark and lowering, is at hand, that one's Christian character is truly tested. If you give the child, who says he loves you, all he wants, and if you yield to all his wishes, he will doubtless be obedient and docile; but take away his favourite playthings, thwart him ever so gently, and see how it will be then. And we are children to our lives' end; I feel myself to be a very child. And I have murmured because my Father saw fit to reserve some precious things which once He let me keep. I have fretted, Fanny, more than you know; I have repined, and struggled, and rebelled. And so my Father has hidden His face, and I can *feel* the darkness that has gathered round me."

"I do not think in such cases God does hide His face, though I know that is the orthodox way of putting it. I believe that His face shines on us, always serene and pitiful as ever, whithersoever we may wander. It is we who encompass ourselves with the thick cloud of our sins and doubts, and weak unfaith; its darkness gathers round us, and so we cannot see the Divine countenance."

"What can one do? how can one penetrate that terrible obscurity?"

"I do not think one *can* penetrate it. But when we are, as it were, walled in with doubts and fears, we must stretch out our arms, feeble though they be, through the thickening gloom, and grope and seek to find our Father's hand. When once we feel that clasp all is well. Ah! how often, in striving to find that hand, we suddenly behold our Father's face. Its glory pierces the shadows; its ineffable love beams out upon us, all the brighter and all the sweeter for the veil that has shrouded it so long; and once more we see and rejoice. One is 'face to face' in faith sometimes, just for a little while. Ah! how good God is always."

"And yet you have been sorely tried?"

"I needed it all. But for sorrow, for privation, and loneliness, and the very shadow of earthly despair, I should never have known God—*my* God. There is something in that *little word, my*, that gives one inexpressible comfort and

courage. Not only the God of the universe, but *my* God. As much mine as if no other creature existed in all the spheres. What pathos is there in the Psalmist's appeal, 'O *my* God, my soul is cast down within me.' And again, 'I will go unto the altar of God, my exceeding joy—yea, upon the harp will I praise Thee, O God, *my* God!' And in all his trouble David says, 'I shall yet praise Him who is the health of my countenance and my God.' And as it was then it is now, and ever shall be. God is always ready to lift us up from darkness and despair, and to give us light once more, and joy unspeakable, and full of glory. Only we must trust Him, and wait for Him, and He must be our God, not merely the great benevolent Spirit who rules all matter and is good and kind to all creatures that His hands have made, but our own God and Father whom we love, and strive to serve, and yearn to know more perfectly — our confidence and strength, and our peculiar joy, whose loving kindness is better than life."

"Fanny, I think the darkness is passing away. I think I see my Father's face once more, smiling through the cloud; and it says, 'My child, trust *Me*; give thyself into My kind care. I love thee! I am thy God, thy Father! No evil shall come nigh thee; thou shalt abide in My shadow, and be at rest.'"

"Do not fear to take it so. Oh, my darling, we are so foolish, so blind; we do not know the good from the evil; that which seems our worst misfortune often works out for us a blessing we had long looked for, yet despaired of attaining.

" ' For us, whatever's undergone
Thou knowest, willest what is done.
Grief may be joy misunderstood;
Only the good discerns the good.
I trust Thee while my days go on.' "

Shall it not be so with us, Florence?"

"I will try; I hope so. I will rest more on God Himself. I do hope the brightness is returning—not the old radiance, you know, which was just like those sparkling spring mornings which are so often clouded over, and end in storm and

rain before the noon — but the clear shining after the rain, the calm, chastened light of the maturer day. But, oh ! Fanny, it is so hard to have one's idols taken down and crumbled to dust."

"I know it is ; and one struggles and feels almost in a frenzy at first ; but the voice that bade the midnight sea cease from its raging speaks presently out of the thick darkness, and immediately there is a great calm. The storm is stilled, and the restless heart is at peace, and breathes out once more that prayer divinely taught, 'Thy will be done.'"

"Fanny, will you think me very wicked when I tell you I never could sing that hymn — that is to say, all of it ? I wonder if anybody ever meant it all ?"

"Yes, two sets of people. First of all, the young and untried, to whom life is as yet only a poem, which they think would lack more than half its beauty if it had no sad cadences ; they sing such hymns with effusion, or quite calmly, little dreaming of the agonies of soul and the convulsion of spirit that awaits them ere they can truly and soberly say, '*Thy will be done.*' And the other set is composed of those whose earthly treasures are all reft away, who have little or nothing more that can be taken from them ; they have nothing to fear, because they have lost all, and, though they are willing to stay as long as God pleases, and do the work assigned them, they are really waiting and longing for the summons which shall call them from an empty world. They have been tried in the fire, and their dross has been consumed. God has Himself filled the void in their hearts, and His will either in doing or suffering has become their will. But as for saying, 'Thy will be done' in anticipation, I do not believe that God ever requires it of us."

"Not that we as Christians should yield our wills always to His ?"

"Not that we should be doing it beforehand, torturing ourselves with the pangs of a sacrifice which not yet is demanded. Our strength is *according to our day*. God has promised *that*, but He does not tell us that He will all at once give us strength for many days. The faith we derive from Him flows to us from a never-failing fountain, from a

perennial spring ; we have no reservoir of our own that we can fill with living water, and draw from it at pleasure. No ; daily and hourly we must go for the strength we need ; we must take it as the Israelites took their manna, knowing that we have a sufficient portion, and confident too that on the morrow all our need will again be abundantly supplied. And don't you think that when our dear Lord said, 'Take no thought for the morrow,' He meant it in spiritual as well as in temporal concerns ? Was it not as if He said, 'Day by day ye shall be fed and clothed if only ye trust to Me ; and day by day I will give you what help you need in the hidden life if only ye come to Me for all supplies, and take joyfully that which is given ?' I really do believe that people create all sorts of miseries for themselves and all sorts of perplexities, and they disquiet their souls in vain, and place stumblingblocks in their own and other people's Christian course, by continually trying to realise to themselves situations that may never occur. They are not content to be saying cheerfully, '*Thy will be done*' to-day, but they are striving to say it for some day next month or next year, when perhaps it will have to be said with a very different meaning from that which they now attach to it."

"The right way then is just to go on with to-day's tasks, to bear to-day's burdens and to-day's crosses, in the strength which God gives to-day, and not to concern one's-self about what an unknown future may bring forth ?"

"I do think we never live so near to God, our true life is never so hid with Christ in God, as when we simply trust Him for everything, when we are content with the day's mercies and the day's strength, when we can heartily say—

" 'I do not ask to see the distant scene ;
One step's enough for me.'

For certainly the power and love that has so far blessed us will lead us on to the end—yes, till the night is gone.

" 'And with the morn those angel faces smile,
Which we have loved long since and lost awhile.'

And then we shall see 'face to face,' and know even as we

are known. Now we take it all on trust, for His word has spoken it."

"Ah! we are climbing the rugged steps of time, while those whose days of mourning are over are joining in the everlasting song on the golden hills of heaven."

"It is ours to labour and to wait still. We have still work to do, while they too have their work doubtless. Courage, Florence; it is not for very long; the longest night ends in dawn, and the dawn brightens to the perfect day. Only let His will be ours *now*; let us cheerfully do His work and wait His pleasure, trusting Him in things great and small, till the light that never shines on earth or sea shines in our eyes that are closing to this world, and we go to be 'for ever with the Lord' and with all His holy dead, who live for evermore in Him and with Him."

"If I could only see my work!"

"I think you are doing it now. You are young, and I quite think you will soon be strong again. You are rich, and God has gifted you with winning ways, with a rare gentleness of spirit, and sweetness of manners, especially in your intercourse with those who are poor as regards this world's substance. It seems to me that in serving others and blessing those who sorely need a little human kindness you may yourself be very happy yet. You have no new career to seek; you have only to go on as you commenced long ago, and in the joy and gratitude of others you will find a sweet and full content which God Himself will own and bless."

"God is good indeed, Fanny. In little things and in great things He is alike bountiful and kind. He sent you to me just when I needed you, when I could no longer keep Esther, and when the two in whom my life was bound up were taken from me—the one by death, the other by a stroke even worse than death. And God has made you very helpful to me, and I believe I shall always thank Him for the providence which brought you so timely to my side."

"Ah! I little thought when Lady Torrisdale drove me nearly wild over our hasty packing and our miserable journey what was in store for me."

"It is just this, that God is entirely our Father, and He takes thought for us even when we are taking no thought for ourselves."

"And He leads us by a way that we know not till in His own good time He brings us to the abiding city."

CHAPTER LII.

THE GRANGE PARLOUR.

THE day had clouded over again, when, the last hill-top being surmounted, they saw before them the peaceful valley of Helmsley, with its deep woods, on which some late autumnal foliage still lingered; its broad green meadow-lands and its clear, shining river winding away in curves of silver to the sea. They came down the rocky slope into the little village, which was scattered round the old Norman church, where Esther had sometimes worshipped. Florence thought of her as they skirted the low mossy churchyard wall, encircling the ancient tombstones, and the quiet grey church itself, with its round arched windows and its deep porch, with many a zigzagged border; but she said nothing till they came to the humble hostelry yecept the "Digby Arms," where a defaced sign-board, faded and even shattered by the weather, creaked from a venerable gable, and was supposed to display the heraldic honours of "the family."

Then Florence said, "Fanny, I propose that we put up here; there are stables enow at the Grange, I know, to accommodate a regiment of cavalry; but I suspect they are in most dilapidated condition; and Peter, who is an old friend of mine, is farm-servant as well as coachman and groom, and is very likely to be away in the fields yonder. Besides, John will want his dinner, and there is never an overplus in the Grange larder. We can walk on easily to the house; it is not a hundred yards to a side gate I know of that is more used than the grand entrance. Do you mind?"

"Of course not. It would be far better than driving up in style, and then sending away the carriage. What a nice place this Helmsley is!"

"Yes, it is a right bonnie place. In summer it is lovely beyond compare; and the Helmsley woods yonder, on the other side of the river, are a sylvan Paradise. Ah! what days Cecil and I used to spend there when we were children! What cosy little pic-nics of our own we had; how we used to scamper over the dead leaves, and climb the rocky mounds and gather wild flowers, and pretend to lose ourselves in the mazes of the 'forest,' as we loved to call it. It was a glorious and mysterious world to us. This way, Fanny; that path leads to the kitchen-court behind; you see I know my ground."

"You used to be often here?"

"Yes, in dear mamma's time, when I was quite a child, you know. I used to come to play with Edith, who is about my own age; and I was very fond of Lancelot and Rupert. I had always an uncontrollable horror of Cuddie; and I remember once when he caught me, and told me that unless I kissed him and promised to be his little wife, he would hang me up to the great chestnut-tree yonder. And he had a piece of cord in his hand, and we were quite alone, and he began making a noose, and I quite believed he was in earnest."

"And did you kiss him?"

"Not I! But I shrieked till some one came to my aid. I was almost in convulsions, I fancy. At any rate I was ill for days; and Cuddie, who is only about three years my senior, got a good horsewhipping from his father. I believe he has hated me ever since. Ah, there he is!"

Fanny looked, and beheld an immensely tall and most ungainly youth, with spindle-like legs and arms, a slouching gait, and a most ferocious expression.

"Papa used to say he had a brutal frontal development, and seemed nearly, if not quite, devoid of moral faculties. His whole nature is grovelling; to hunt, and shoot, and fish, and drink, and keep low company, is all he cares about. I am afraid he is a terrible burden to them all. There! he is meeting some low fellow now, and they are slouching off into the coppice. Why! it cannot be, it surely cannot be!—and yet that short, stout young man, swaggering along with his

hands in his pockets, and his shabby hat over his eyes, is just like Dick Hellicar !”

“Esther’s cousin ! What can he want here ?”

“What indeed ! He came down early in the summer, I know, and wanted Esther to marry him, and he went away in high dudgeon, vowing to be revenged on her because she very naturally refused him. His being here, if it be he, bodes no good to any one. A fine pair he and Cuddie Digby would make ! though I really believe that, on the whole, Dick is the less evilly disposed of the two.”

The next turn brought them in front of the house, and three or four stout children, who were playing on the broad steps, in roundabout cotton pinafores, took sudden flight, and undoubtedly announced their arrival to the family.

Lettice came to meet them and shily asked them into the dining-room, where were Mrs. Digby, and Edith, and the large-eyed, open-mouthed children, who had heralded their approach.

Mrs Digby was evidently in a fluster. She was not so self-possessed as was Edith, and she was painfully conscious of the shabbiness of the furniture, and of being herself not only shabby but untidy. As usual she lay upon the old, faded, chintz-covered sofa, with a book in her white, listless hands ; while Edith as usual plied her needle, with a basket before her full to overflowing with all kinds of juvenile habiliments in all stages of disrepair. She was looking very pale and wan, and was evidently much more the invalid than Mrs. Digby, though the bare supposition of this fact would have extremely offended that worthy lady.

“Really, Miss Guise, I did not at first know you,” said Mrs. Digby, rising awkwardly, and looking at herself ruefully, as she strove in vain to shake her crumpled, ill-put-on old dress into something like decent order. She knew, too, that her slippers were down at heel, and that her skirts were deficient in length, while a glance at the mirror opposite showed her fair hair all rough and tangled. No wonder that the mistress of Helmsley Grange was mortified at being caught in such a plight, but that morning she had been engrossed with an exciting novel, and had put off dressing till

after the early dinner ; besides, visitors of their own degree were now extremely rare at Helmsley Grange, and it was long since any lady had called on Mrs. Digby.

“ I am such a sad invalid, you know, that really you must excuse all my shortcomings. I know I ought to have called upon you ! All the summer I kept saying to Edith, Really, my dear, we *must* get to Guise somehow ; what will Miss Guise think of us ? But I sympathised with you all the same, and Edith and I talked about you ; and once I gave, or else I meant to give, Lancelot a kind message for you, for it was so easy for him to go round by the Court on his way to Templemoor. But I am not sure that I ever did give him the message ; my memory is sadly impaired ; constant and serious illnesses have shattered my constitution, and increasing weakness warns me that my time here will not be long. Ah ! my dear Miss Guise, what a blessing health is ! ”

“ It is, indeed, Mrs. Digby ; I have been far from well myself since the summer, so I am quite prepared to sympathise with invalids.”

“ Ah ! ” said Mrs. Digby, putting her hand to her forehead, “ somebody did say that you were quite *seriously* unwell ; and I really meant to send you some of the pills which have done me so much good. I got the advice of a really celebrated man who was staying at Stannington, at the Deanery, and he took quite an interest in my case. I told him all my symptoms in detail, and, after a very careful examination, he decided that my liver *was* affected ; my own doctor always said it was *not*, you see, and I felt sure he was wrong in his diagnosis, as well as in his treatment. He insisted on my taking exercise, when he might have known that it was altogether out of the question ; and he was not sympathising either ; and I think want of sympathy is a very serious defect in a medical man, don't you, Miss Guise ? But this Dr. Drew is the nicest, kindest, cleverest young man I ever met with. When he had carefully examined me, and heard my statements, and listened attentively to all I had to say about former illnesses, especially that confinement when Hughy was born, and the terrible relapse I had seven weeks and three days and a half after the birth of the twins,

and the virulent and most remarkable scarlet typhoid fever, when they quite thought my spirit had forsaken her tenement of clay — he said, emphatically, ‘My dear madam, your liver *is* affected, there is not a doubt of it. But your grand defect, the source of all your suffering, is *weakness*. You are so pitifully weak that your constitution cannot stand the inroads of even minor and ordinary maladies ; you cannot even take advantage of the remedies which are commonly prescribed in cases like yours. The medicines I should unhesitatingly order for any one less sensitively organised would act as baneful irritants, or even as absolute poisons, on a system sensitive as yours. My dear madam, *I dare not* subject you to the treatment which would suit almost any other woman. You are rarely, I may say exceptionally, delicate. You should live well — generously. You want choice food and fine old wines, perfect rest, no cares, plenty of repose, and frequent change of scene without fatigue.’ I felt that he understood my mournfully singular case as no one had ever understood it before. I could only reply : ‘Doctor, your talents are unrivalled : at one interview you comprehend symptoms which have hitherto puzzled the profession ; rest I cannot have ; I have a large family, and my cares are manifold and incessant. Our resources are not what they once were, and greatly I fear that a prolonged tour, such as I know would give me fresh life, is not within my reach.’ ‘Then, madam,’ said he, ‘I will give you some valuable prescriptions, which, from their mildness, an infant might adopt.’ And he wrote me out two prescriptions, recommending that I should have them made up in London, rather than in Stannington, where drugs can scarcely be depended on as unadulterated and fresh. ‘*Panis*’ was the chief ingredient in the pills, I recollect ; and the principal thing in the alterative, or tonic — I am not sure which he called it — was ‘*aqua pura*.’ And really those pills have done me more good than anything I have taken for years. If only I could go to Italy, or say to Cannes, for the winter ! But it cannot be, and I cheerfully resign myself to the inevitable — rather, I should say, to Providence ; there is nothing like a spirit of resignation, is there, Miss Guise ?”

“It is sometimes a greater blessing than the enjoyment of those things which we desire but which it pleases our Father in Heaven to withhold.”

“Just what I frequently observe myself, when I am so tried. And indeed, my dear Miss Guise, you are looking extremely delicate. Do you take cod-liver oil?”

“I have taken it, and I think it has done me good; but I feel so much better that I hope to dispense with it in future: it is horrible stuff!”

“Ah! do you know I rather like it! I have taken so much of it; and one can acquire a taste for anything, you know. I believe it is the cod-liver oil that keeps me alive; I should be in a frightful state of emaciation if I did not take it continually.”

Anything plumper than Mrs. Digby was at present could scarcely be imagined; her fingers were as sleek as they were fair; her whole form, though far from disagreeably stout, was beautifully full and rounded; though her complexion was unhealthy, and she reclined with a languid grace, supposed to be indicative of her chronic invalidism. All this time Edith was diligently stitching away at one of the blue cotton roundabout pinafores which had come from the wash in a frightful state of tatter. But both Florence and Fanny noticed how she stooped, how her fingers trembled as she threaded her needle, and how very thin and pale she was. Her dress appeared to hang upon her, her cheeks were sunken, her eyes heavy, and there were hollows in her temples which showed how thorough was the attenuation she suffered. All the brightness seemed to have faded out of her sweet face; and though she worked away as if she had not a minute to lose, there was no energy in her movements, no animation in her looks.

“But,” said Florence, as soon as she could find an opportunity—for Mrs. Digby had again embarked full sail on the Black Sea of her ceaseless and mysterious ailments, and was descanting largely on her “want of power,” of which she seemed vastly proud—“but, Mrs. Digby, we all look well compared with Edith. I am grieved to see her so altered; *she must be very ill.*”

“Oh ! as to that,” replied Mrs. Digby, sharply, “she has had nothing particular the matter with her ; she has been a little out of health lately ; no one can be quite well always, I tell her. But she gives way. People who are constitutionally strong think so much of a little common indisposition.”

“Edith is more than commonly unwell, Mrs. Digby ; you see her every day and do not remark so much the change that has come over her. Has she had advice ?”

“Oh, yes ; our own doctor saw her, and so did my friend Dr. Drew. *He* said, as I say, she is out of health, simply out of health ; and he prescribed change ; and my husband—men are so thoughtless, so foolish indeed, Miss Guise—proposed that she should go up to her brothers in London, and spend a few weeks with them. Such nonsense ! as if country air must not be better for any sort of complaint than a close London atmosphere, in which the lungs must inhale so much that is pernicious ! Besides, she could not be spared. I said to papa, ‘My dear, how can you be so cruel as to think of my being left alone, with all your romping children ? How can I, a poor invalid, struggle with the cares of a family ? It is heartless of you, it is indeed ; and I feel it acutely !’ So, of course, the idea was given up. I am sorry to say that Edith was so selfish as to wish to leave me, though no one knows better than herself that any over-exertion may be my death.”

“But suppose she is quite laid aside ?” said Fanny. “I have had some experience with invalids, and I can see quite plainly that Miss Digby is keeping up only by the most strenuous efforts, only *just* keeping up : it is an unnatural strain, which cannot continue. She will succumb at last, and not be able to leave her bed, and that will be worse than having her from home.”

“Pray do not put such depressing notions into her head,” cried Mrs. Digby, almost in tears ; “you will make her think that she is really ill, and then she will give way, and Heaven knows when she will rouse herself again. If she would only persevere with Dr. Drew’s medicines !”

Something like a smile played across Edith’s pale, wearied

face. She knew a little Latin, and Mrs. Digby's bathos of ignorance amused her in spite of her feeling feebler and more languid than ever. The good lady cherished the delusion that "*panis*" and "*aqua pura*" were rare drugs of most undoubted efficacy. Edith knew better, and could not perceive the utility of adding to the family expenses by the useless purchase of bread pills rolled in a little rhubarb; and coloured water, just flavoured with something nauseous! But the effort to keep down the smile made her slightly hysterical, and Florence, perceiving her distress, carried her off into another room, very much to Mrs. Digby's amazement, and by no means to her satisfaction. Women of her type—that is, women who love to discourse on their maladies and general debility—are invariably annoyed and jealous at the smallest manifestation of the like symptoms in those about them. No one less brook a rival, however involuntary, than *la malade imaginaire*!

Meanwhile Fanny remained, listening to that oft-told tale of the scarlet fever, the acute bronchitis, and the severe confinements. When just as Mrs. Digby was laid up with the neuralgia, and prostrate with influenza, and suffering agonies of dyspepsia, previous to the birth of the twins, the squire, who had heard of the advent of the ladies from Little Guise, made his appearance. After talking awhile with Fanny he asked for Florence, and was told with some asperity that Edith had had one of her stupid fits, and that Miss Guise had gone away with her somewhere, "just to quiet her."

"I am greatly obliged to Miss Guise," said the squire with emphasis.

"The truth is," continued Fanny, thinking she would take advantage of Mr. Digby's presence and countenance, "we came here, Miss Guise and I, in the hope of taking Miss Digby back with us for a few weeks' change of air and scene, and for the perfect rest and quiet she cannot possibly secure among so many children."

Mrs. Digby shrieked out a little ejaculation of dismay. Mr. Digby, who seemed to take no more heed of shrill interjections than of the twitter of birds, replied, "And you shall take her, Miss—Miss——"

"Tucker," suggested Fanny, quietly.

"You shall take her, Miss Tucker, and a thousand thanks to you and to Miss Guise. Lettie! go and tell your sister to get ready."

"No! no! no!" protested Mrs. Digby. "What is to become of *me*? Who will look after the children?"

"Since you are their mother I think you had better do it yourself, my dear; and I know Rose will be quite a steady elder sister."

"Yes, papa, I *will*," eagerly put in Rose. "Edith has taught me how to manage. I always help her wash baby, and put the little ones to bed. I could manage, I know; only please send dear Edith away to be taken care of, else I am sure she will die!"

"She shall go!" returned the squire, still more decidedly. "Rose, go and pack up her things."

But at this juncture Florence returned without Edith, and Mr. Digby at once took up his parable, and made quite a long speech, at the end of which it was settled that without any further discussion, and to Mr. Digby's everlasting obligation, Edith should accept Miss Guise's invitation! Mrs. Digby lay back on the sofa, with closed eyes and clenched hands—she very probably supposed herself to have fainted; but no one else supposing it, and it being one of those facts difficult of personal announcement, she had to content herself with heaving piteous sighs and casting meek, upbraiding glances at all around her.

"Ah!" she murmured presently, looking pathetically at the squire, "it will not last much longer! I know I am a sad burden, an invalid wife *must* be a burden always; but the sense of being regarded as a burden adds tenfold to one's trials."

"My dear," returned the squire, "please to understand distinctly that I repudiate the idea of your being a burden," and he evidently meant it, which Fanny thought was very good of him. "Neither do I think your demise at all likely to occur at present. You have been making *post-mortem* arrangements ever since Rose was born, and they have not been carried into effect yet. It will come some time you

say? To be sure it will; we must all die, and a very good thing too. Who wants to live for ever in this troublesome world? But I really think, Letitia, that your lease of life is as good or better than any of ours who are in this room now, except perhaps the children, who may naturally expect to outlive their mother!"

The children looked as if they had no objection.

But Mrs. Digby answered mournfully, "You will see, Mr. Digby, you will see! I feel myself failing day by day."

"My dear, you have been failing ever since I knew you, and you have not failed yet."

"Every medical man whom I have consulted tells me how weak I am."

"I am sorry to say medical men are in the habit of telling white lies to their lady patients. But be assured when a doctor persists in telling a woman who is not absolutely the victim of disease that she is '*weak*,' he means quite as much in mind as in body! And if you would just rouse yourself, my dear, and come down to breakfast, and take a good walk every day with the children, and forswear trashy novels and rubbishing medicine, you would soon be a very hearty and healthy woman."

Mrs. Digby made no rejoinder. She knew her ground very well. She was quite aware that nothing she could say would operate on her husband in his present frame of mind. She therefore preserved a dejected silence, and reserved her defence till such time as reproaches and tears, and probably hysteria, would produce the desired effect. In the meantime she knew that Edith must go; but she secretly resolved that everything at home should go wrong in consequence of her step-daughter's absence. It was so inconsiderate of Edith to be ill when she was so essential to the household comfort, so selfish of her to give way, and want to accept Miss Guise's invitation; and it was extremely thoughtless, not to say impertinent, in Miss Guise to invite a girl without previous reference to the wishes of her parents. As for the squire, he was downright unfeeling; it was *brutal* of him to say what he did when he knew how much she suffered and the *extreme debility* of her nervous system! She did not perhaps

deliberately determine within herself that she would be worse than usual next day, but she did assure herself that of necessity she must have an alarming access of illness after being so cruelly tried !

Women of Mrs. Digby's type are essentially untruthful ; they cannot even be truthful to themselves.

Florence explained that she was thinking of passing the night at Chilcombe, and that she would call next day for Edith ; but the squire whispered, " Couldn't you take her with you now ? To-morrow there may be some hindrance I cannot overcome. I am sure Miss Uffadyne would put her somewhere."

So Edith was muffled up and went off to the Chenies, and Cecil was delighted with her guests. The next day the two ladies returned to Little Guise, and Edith was borne away in triumph, to be nursed and petted to their hearts' content. Poor Edith ! it was entirely a new sensation to be waited upon and to have nothing to do ; but she was too weak at present to enjoy the novelty of her position. Florence had only come to the rescue just in time.

CHAPTER LIII.

OSWALD'S LAST APPEAL.

I HAVE not time to tell the story of Edith's gradual improvement and Florence's decided restoration to health ; but the journey to Helmsley and to Chilcombe seemed to do for Florence what the rest and luxuries of Little Guise did for Edith. As for Fanny, she throve and prospered, and became quite a fine, blooming young woman, now that she had found a congenial home, and was no longer exposed to the slow torture of Lady Torrisdale's temper. Her ladyship had cheap lodgings in Paris, and had hired as her companion the orphan daughter of a poor clergyman—a girl of eighteen, who was expected to make herself " generally useful," and to be always in the most angelic state of mind, under every

provocation ! How heartily both Fanny and Florence pitied this luckless Miss Dampier needs not to be recorded.

And in spite of Mrs. Digby's neuralgia, and her hysteria and extreme exhaustion, Edith remained at Little Guise till the end of the winter, and the Digby household got on as well as it could with Rose at the head of the nursery department. Not much was heard of Lancelot and Rupert, till one January morning a letter came with news that excited Edith and interested her friends. Rupert was going out to Australia for several years on most advantageous terms, and he was coming back to the Grange to say good-bye. As for Lancelot, he was working hard, and slowly but steadily acquiring a literary reputation. Already he had published a volume of poems which had attracted favourable notice in high quarters, and he had made certain engagements, which resulted in a settled and very comfortable little income. A small income undoubtedly for the heir of the Digbys, but by much the largest he had ever known. He owed no man anything, he told Edith ; and he could afford to belong to a club, and to buy books to a certain extent ; and when the spring came he meant to make many little journeys out of town, for the refreshment alike of mind and body. He was delighted to hear of her prolonged visit at Little Guise, and he sent Edith a five-pound note and a handsome blue silk dress. Moreover, the new poem, "Grey and Gold," was successfully advancing to completion,—only that was a secret. And speaking of "Grey and Gold," had Edith heard anything of Miss Kendall ?

Yes ! Edith had heard several times from Esther, and she was well and happy, though longing sometimes, as she confessed, with a sick, weary longing, for her dear old Chilcombe home, which grew all the dearer the longer she remained away from it. If she had only known how Oswald would take himself off to African wilds and Arabian deserts she might have remained a little longer in her old quarters. But her new experiences were doing her good ; she was beginning to speak French quite fluently, and she was just beginning to study German with a young lady whose mother was *Madame Bethune's* most intimate friend. The Bethunes

were exceedingly kind, and the children were dear, affectionate little things. She was introduced to all Madame's friends ; she was even obliged to refuse invitations lest she should neglect her duties and her studies, which, of course, were so important ! And when the summer came they were all going to Switzerland, and oh ! what happiness it would be if any of the dear Chilcombe friends should find their way to Geneva, or Lucerne, or Interlachen, at the same time !

It was a brilliant morning towards the end of April, when Esther, who was sitting alone, in the absence of her little pupils, with their mamma, and busy with the German grammar, was told that a gentleman wished to see her in the *salon*.

"It is some mistake," said Esther ; "no one here would inquire for me !" But her heart gave a great bound, nevertheless, for might it not be Lancelot ? Madame had said she thought he would be in Paris that spring, or before they left for Switzerland. And Esther longed to tell him how more and more she felt his kindness in providing her with so safe and happy a home. "Go and ask the gentleman's name, Julie," said Esther, at length ; and the girl went, and in less than a minute returned, announcing Mr. Oswald Uffadyne ! He had discovered that Esther was at home, and alone, and he slipped a napoleon into Julie's hand with the understanding that he should be ushered at once into Esther's presence. But the Esther of Chilcombe, the Esther he had seen last in his sister's drawing-room, was not the Esther of the Rue St. Dominique ! Even in looks she was greatly altered ; she was much taller and much handsomer ; her once sallow complexion was becoming a clear olive ; her figure had lost its angularities, and her carriage was at once graceful and dignified. She was dressed, too, as Oswald had never seen her dressed before. She was in simple but elegant morning costume, for Madame Eugène Bethune took a deep interest in Lancelot's *protégée*, and insisted on superintending her toilet, and teaching her the art of dressing herself—an art in which Madame, as a true Frenchwoman, was a proficient.

Esther rose and stood before her unwelcome visitor with a superb *hauteur*, which greatly astonished and rather discomfited him. He had expected her to be frightened and to look angry, if indeed the weary months of exile had not taught her how much she had thrown away in dismissing him so cavalierly. But this cool self-possession, this practised air of a young lady in society, rather staggered him ; nor was he consoled when he heard her say coldly, "Julie, you have made a mistake ; this gentleman is no friend of mine. Show him back again to the *salon*, and tell Madame as soon as she arrives that a visitor is awaiting her."

But Julie, at once conscience-stricken and fearing for her napoleon, and thinking too that there might be more where that came from, was gone before Esther could finish her sentence. Julie was a good girl in the main, but she could be conveniently deaf, blind, or dumb as occasions required. Besides, she was going to be married, and there was her trousseau to be thought of, and stray napoleons did not come to her every day. Clearly it was her duty to render the service that was expected of her for that bright piece of gold ; it was only right that the handsome young Englishman should have value returned for his little investment.

"Esther," began Oswald, the moment the door had closed on the accommodating Julie, "Esther !"

"I am Miss Kendall here !" was the unexpected reply.

"I cannot, will not call you that ! Nay ; do not look so cold and proud, do not turn away ! Will you not listen to me ?"

"I suppose I must," replied Esther, quietly, taking her seat ; "but if you are come to renew the solicitations of last summer, let me tell you that you will spare yourself some mortification and me some pain if you do not say that which you are intending."

"Esther, you are very hard ; you are cruel. I begin to think you have no heart !"

"Did you come here on purpose to tell me what you think of me ?"

"I came here, Esther, to tell you that I love you more than ever. I have tried to forget you ; I have striven hard

to banish you from my memory ; but go where I will, occupy myself as I may, your image is always before me, your voice is for ever ringing in my ears. Once more I entreat you to tell me that I may *hope* ; that some day, when I have convinced you of the steadfastness of my attachment, when you perceive that no one will be rendered miserable by our union, you will relent, and make me the happiest man alive. And, Esther, I think I could make you a very happy woman. There could be no worthier lady of Guise."

"Never, Mr. Uffadyne. Never—no, never, come what may—will I reign at Guise ! And I should not make you happy, even though I yielded to your wishes, for I should be an unloving wife."

"You do not understand yourself, Esther ; but once give yourself to me, that is all I ask. Once my wife, or even my betrothed, you would let your affections have free course. You have strong and deep affections, Esther ; there is a wonderful mingling of strength and tenderness in your nature. Once consent to love, and you will love passionately."

"Do you think I do not know that ? I understand myself better than you imagine, Mr. Uffadyne. I know that my love once given would be given in fullest measure ; it would be passionate as enduring, strong and deep as tender. The man I love must be my king, my master, my teacher ; at his feet I will sit, and learn all goodness and all wisdom. He will be all the world to me, and he must give me all *his* heart. Only God must stand before me."

"And such love you will not give to me ?"

"I cannot. One cannot bestow one's love at pleasure, as one can bequeath money or lands, because it is a duty, or because it is expected, or because one does not care very much which way such possessions go. There is a mystery in true, pure, holy love of which you know nothing, of which you cannot dream."

"Esther, what shall I do to make you believe in me, to make you trust me, to convince you that I love you better than my life ?"

"Leave me, and do not persecute me with addresses which

are painful and altogether unwelcome. If you love me as you say, do not press upon me a suit I can never attend. Do you think it is any pleasure to me to give you pain—you whom I once esteemed my friend, and for whom, as Florence's husband and Cecil's brother, I entertain a most sisterly regard? I am but a poor, ignorant girl, full of faults, but I am no coquette! You make me very wretched—indeed you do. I was reconciled to live away from Chilcombe; I was feeling how good and kind the friends here were to me; I was entering into the new life and enjoying it. And now you come to unsettle me, to revive the bitterness of the past. How could you be so unkind? It is you who are cruel, not I. It is you who have no compassion on me—a poor, lonely girl, who has no real claim on any of the dear people who are so good to me.”

“I will go away, Esther, and never see you again. You may go back to Chilcombe if you will. I intended this for my last appeal, and if I failed I settled with myself what I would do. By midsummer I shall be in America; I will go there; I will seek a home in a new world, where nothing can remind me of the woman I so vainly loved, and who has blighted all my life.”

Esther drew herself up indignantly; her cheeks were burning, and her lustrous dark eyes flashing with the intensity of her feelings. Slowly she said, “It is false, Oswald Uffadyne. I have *not* blighted your life, though you have done your very best to blight mine. By God's mercy you were not permitted to hurt me, for God has turned all my trials into blessings. All that I went through last autumn was good for me; but you were not the less to blame that you exposed me to a trouble that might have been my loss, my ruin. But even if you had had a right to love me and to address me, which you know you never had, I had an equal right to refuse you. We women have not the privilege of choice; we too sometimes love unrequitedly, and we have to guard our secret jealously, and in silence to bear the pain as bravely as we may; but, lacking the prerogatives of your sex, it would be hard indeed if we were obliged to listen *and yield to the first man who came a-wooing, whether we*

cared for him or not. And no man—and equally of course no woman—has any right to say his or her life is blighted because one coveted possession is withheld. God did not send us into the world solely to marry or to be given in marriage. True love between man and woman is very beautiful and most sacred, but it is not the one thing in life. It is God's will that some—some whom He loves best, I think—should never know the greatest joy which this world can give ; but we need not be all unhappy or *blighted*, as you call it, for that. God will help in the first great anguish, which must be borne ; then come rest and peace, a new strength, and presently joy in the work we have to do. Our hearts are filled with a quiet content ; we labour in faith and in hope ; but for the fulness of bliss we wait for the life to come."

"Esther, I will think of what you say, and if I had any work——"

"And have you not, you who are master of Guise ?"

"I cannot endure the place ; I will not go near it."

"You *must*. If you love me do as I bid you ; go home to Guise, to your goodly inheritance ; do your duty there among your own people, and seek their welfare. Serve your country ; be a man. Be a blessing in your day and generation, so that your children's children shall be proud to bear your name. Make yourself worthy of Florence, and then go to her once more, and implore her to pardon the brief madness of your youth, and to receive you as of old."

"Florence would never take me back again. She is proud."

"Not too proud for a wronged woman. But she loved you, and love will master pride. She would not take you now, I know, not if you went to her on bended knee protesting a thousand times your repentance. You are not what she loved, for she loved a high-souled, tender-spirited, brave-hearted Oswald, who existed only in her own imagination. Make yourself that Oswald ; it is in you. Oh ! indeed you are too good to be wasted. Make yourself what you well might be. God will aid you, if you strive humbly and

earnestly to retrieve the past. Good-bye; do not let me see you again till you are worthy to go back to her whom really you love. You will be so thankful some day that I sent you away."

"I think not; but I will go, Esther. I will do your bidding. I will go straight home to Guise; I will try to do my duty."

"I am so glad! Then we shall meet again, you, and I, and Florence happily. But will you not give up your fellowship?"

"I am going to do so."

"That is well! Get out of leading-strings before you begin the career of a man. Start free, and take for your watchword the old chivalric motto, 'For God and for my lady.'"

"And my lady?"

"Is Florence Guise, no other! God bless you; good-bye."

CHAPTER LIV.

"BUT WHAT WILL OSWALD SAY?"

BUT before Oswald saw Esther in the Rue St. Dominique events which he had little foreseen were transpiring at home. Rupert did come down to Helmsley, and spent a fortnight in the neighbourhood prior to his departure for Australia. Of course he found Edith absent when he returned to the Grange, and Mrs. Digby immediately suggested that she should be sent for, that she might spend with her brother the few days which intervened before his departure. But this proposal was at once and firmly negatived by the squire; he had been at Little Guise only the week before, and he had promised Miss Guise that Edith should continue her guest for at least two months longer. Edith had not had any holiday, he declared, for seven years; as soon as ever she was old enough to be trusted she was pressed into the service of the nursery; and the continued supply of babies, and their

mother's invalidism, had kept her as laboriously and incessantly occupied as if she had been actually in the ranks of servitude.

Mr. Digby was beginning to be awake to the fact that his eldest daughter had been rather ruthlessly sacrificed ; as long as she looked well and happy he had not considered the cruelty of her position. But when her health declined he began to reflect that he was not doing his duty by her, and he had begun to be very uneasy, and to feel terribly puzzled, when Florence came, like a good fairy, and carried the neglected and overwrought girl away from the scene of her manifold duties and incessant worries to a region of peace and rest and happy change. And then the squire had covenanted with himself, at all risks and at any cost, to make certain alterations in his household ; and he resolved that Edith, when she came home again, should not resume the position which had been hers so long. Another servant should be kept, and Mrs. Digby should endeavour to be more than the nominal mistress of her family.

So, when Florence begged for an extension of Edith's furlough, it had been most willingly granted, and the squire had said : " My dear Miss Guise, I am under eternal obligations to you ! I do not know what would have become of my poor girl if you had not thought of her. I could not have sent her away by herself, and though her brothers would have been glad to have her with them, it would not have been quite the thing, would it ? Now you have nursed her up, and petted her, till she begins to look quite herself again."

" Indeed, papa," said Edith, " I am feeling quite recovered : it is delightful being here, but I am afraid I must be very much wanted."

" Of course you are wanted ; there is a pretty ado sometimes, when everything goes sixes and sevens for the want of a little forethought and common sense ; but Rosie does very well for her age, and I found your mamma actually dressing baby with her own hands only yesterday ; and though she assured me that she should faint afterwards, she didn't, Edith. I do not mean you to be nurse-maid and sempstress and housekeeper any longer."

"But, papa, are you sure you are comfortable yourself?"

"Well, my dear, I am not more uncomfortable than usual. A man who is always under the weather as I am, and as I have always been, is not generally very comfortable, unless he happens to be a vagabond, which I believe I am not. But I am rubbing on, and really things are looking up a little. I have thrashed out that rick and sold it to advantage; and if we have a good lambing season I shall be a little in pocket, which will be quite a novel experience for me. I mean to look after things rather more than I have done. Peter is getting too old for his work, and he dislikes progress; and Lancelot and Rupert are off my hands, and promising to do well. Yes, I really do think things are looking up."

"I am so thankful, papa; we have had a long, dreary time. I always thought the sunshine would come some day."

"What made you think so?"

"God is good. I knew He was only permitting the trouble for our good. And I had a talk once with Esther Kendall, and she told me how she believed all lives were intermingled grey and gold; now sunshine and now shadow; now the clear summer sky, and now mists and rain. Also, she said, that if we wait patiently and take lovingly whatever God sees fit to give, light will always arise out of darkness; and while we calmly do our duty through the grey and cloudy hours the sun is still shining, and by-and-bye, almost without our knowing it, will scatter the shades and break through the clouds, and it will all be bright and fair again."

"But, my child, some lives are all grey; they are sad and clouded to the last."

"Oh, papa, I think not; it only seems so. Every dark cloud they say has a silver lining, and every grey life has an inner golden beauty of its own even if the world do not see it. At least it may be so if people will not despond, and cherish their griefs, and rebel against what they call their fate. And Florence says the same; we colour our own lives very much for ourselves, and the grey and the gold is often of our own choosing. It is not so much events themselves as the way in which we take them that makes them either happy or unhappy. People who do not trust God, who always dread

the future, and go out to meet trouble beforehand, must inevitably be wretched, and their lives will be grey, though the golden radiance of blessings and mercies stream all about their path."

"Of course it is the right thing to make the very best of what comes to us."

"It is the common-sense way of looking at life as well as the Christian way. Indeed, since I have known Florence and Fanny Tucker I have been astonished to discover how very much plain good sense and sound rationality there is in Christianity. I am afraid, papa, I used to have the very haziest notions about religion. I thought going to church, and reading the Bible and good books, and private prayer made up religion. It never occurred to me that these things were only a small part of the whole, and that they were of little or of no value unless we lived them out daily in faith, and patience, and cheerfulness. Oh, papa, I have learnt a great deal since I came to Little Guise."

"I have been learning too, Edith, of late, though not precisely the same lessons. My boys' steady purpose to work and to retrieve the past has not been without significance. But, Edie, I am in a sad trouble about Cuddie; he is always in the stable with that young scamp Bill Scattergood, or off with Fuggles, who is known to be one of the worst characters in the neighbourhood. And then there is that new friend of his, the young man from London—no, from Birmingham, I think. A more villainous-looking fellow I never encountered."

"What is his name?"

"I am not sure that I ever heard it; yes, I have heard it though—*Dick*. Let me see, was it Dick Harrison or Dick Hellier? I really cannot recollect; it was Dick I am certain, and if it was not Hellier it was something remarkably like it."

"Do you not think, papa, you ought—I mean would it not be better to find out exactly who this young man is? I saw him once, and I did not like him at all. He might get Cuddie into trouble."

"And his friends, if they saw Cuddie, might return the

compliment. Cuddie takes after his scampering great-uncle I am afraid. Well, we will not talk any more on so disagreeable a subject. I must have a little serious conversation with Cuddie, and insist upon his working if he stay at home."

Rupert soon found his way to Little Guise. He went on the Friday and remained till the following Tuesday, and it so happened that Cecil was there, for of late she had found the Chenies intolerably dull, and she was glad of an excuse to visit her cousin and Fanny, and of late she had taken a great interest in Edith Digby.

Cecil had always liked Lancelot, though at the same time she denounced him as a foolish, dreaming, unpractical young man; but against Rupert she had professed herself somewhat prejudiced. She scarcely knew why, but she charged him with all Lance's foibles and shortcomings without giving him the credit for any of Lance's virtues. Only in the preceding summer she had spoken to Esther of Rupert most bitterly, bidding her be aware of so idle and worthless a young man, and keep out of his way if he came to the Slade; "for," as she sententiously remarked, "idleness and mischief generally go together, and a girl had always better keep clear of a young man who has so little occupation that he is almost sure to do the devil's work for want of any other."

Esther had simply replied, "I do not think he looks like that sort of young man, Miss Uffadyne, and he is very kind to his sister; but I will take your advice; I will keep out of his way if come on business to Mr. King."

Now Cecil had judged Rupert Digby hastily. He was certainly not at work, as it behoved a young man of his ability, and with his unsatisfactory prospects to work. If he worked at all it was without a definite purpose, and to be purposeless was to be vicious in Cecil's eyes. When he went away with Lancelot to London she hoped better things of him, but scarcely expected that he would "get on." His unbusiness-like habits must be against him, she argued, and then laziness was a family attribute of the Digbys—at least of the masculine portion of it, for no one could say that Edith or her little sister Rose was lazy. And Cecil confidently predicted that he would be back again by Christmas,

walking over the farm with his hands in his pockets, or galloping about on the roan mare he had trained himself. Cecil, however, learned to think rather differently of Rupert as time passed on, and his home letters breathed more and more the language of energy, perseverance, and steadfast purpose. Edith always read her letters aloud when they came to her, so that her friends were pretty well posted up in all news appertaining to her brothers.

The rector had been asked to meet Rupert Digby, but just before dinner he had sent a note excusing himself on the plea of indisposition, so Rupert was the only gentleman present. He did not sit over his wine at all, but went at once with the ladies to the drawing-room, when it was proposed on all hands to have a musical evening.

"How well you play!" said Rupert to Cecil, as she took her fingers from the keys. "Some people think that any tyro can play an accompaniment. Now, I think that it requires the highest musical talent to render effectively such an accompaniment as the one we have just had. It needs a delicate ear, a perfect taste, a fine touch, most thorough time, and no small powers of execution. I should like you to accompany me always, Miss Uffadyne."

"And I should like you to sing frequently to my accompaniment. It is not with every voice that my fingers move so easily in unison. You are a musical family, you Digbys. I remember our concerts of old, when we were all children."

"So do I. How proud we were when we could achieve 'The Chough and Crow!' Lancelot used to play the accompaniment. There was nothing I missed so much in leaving home as our little musical entertainments, for we kept it up long after you, and Oswald, and Miss Guise deserted us—we three, Lancelot, and Edie, and I—and by-and-bye the little ones joined in. Rosie really has a very nice voice, and she learned her notes by instinct, I believe."

"Do you like your new life?"

"Yes, I like it thoroughly. I had no idea how much there was in business requiring absolute talent as well as the more substantial qualities of industry and energy. I declare to you, Miss Uffadyne, there is in business, as it is now, in

these go-a-head, competitive days, an immense scope for powers of every kind. Business has become an art and science combined, and every day commercial enterprise seeks some new field or builds up marvellous fresh edifices on the old foundations. I assure you I begin to feel proud of being a business man ! ”

“ I know no greater absurdity than that which votes business to be derogatory. But you were a brave man, Mr. Rupert. You were the first of your name who ever pursued a commercial calling. ”

“ Yes, and my poor father was fairly aghast when first I told him my intentions. I believe he thought my dead ancestors would get up out of their graves to protest against them ; but I talked him over. I should not have liked to begin my new career under his disapprobation. But my father, like many other country gentlemen of ancient family, had very shadowy notions on the subject of business. Trade was dirty, he averred, abounding in fraud, trickery, and all sorts of miserable pettinesses, and one could not touch pitch and not be defiled, etc., etc. I promised him, on my honour as a Digby, that if I found it impracticable to follow out my proposed schemes without condescending to meanness, without being implicated in that which a Christian gentleman ought to shun, I would relinquish them without hesitation. But I have found that a man of business may be an earnest Christian and a refined gentleman, also that he may be of the highest type as regards intelligence and culture. Of course there are shams in every vocation, and there are vagabonds in every calling, even in the Church ; but that is no reason why I should compromise my own self-respect, in the name of commerce, or even hold intercourse with those whom I know to be unworthy. What did you think yourself, Miss Uffadyne, when you heard of a Digby going into a merchant's office to earn his bread ? ”

“ I honoured you, ” said Cecil, with emphasis. “ For the first time I began to do you justice. But I will be quite candid, and confess that I scarcely imagined that you would succeed. All your previous life, your old habits, seemed to *tell against you*. I felt how brave it was of you to address

yourself to the encounter, but I was prepared to find you worsted in the *mélée*."

"You doubted my perseverance?"

"I doubted more than that; I am ashamed of myself, but, since you ask me, I cannot be disingenuous. But, Mr. Rupert, I have made so many mistakes within the last two or three years that I begin to think my own judgment of very little value. You are not the only person whom I have under-estimated, and I have learned to distrust myself."

"I never gave you any cause to think highly of me. I only played at work, you know; I scorned the idea of being fettered by regulations. I was never in earnest."

"And now?"

"Now I am indeed in earnest. I have chosen my work, and I am proud of it, and I mean to stick to it and to devote to it my best energies and all my powers. God helping me, *I will succeed*."

And the young man drew himself up, and looked as if he were ready to brave every hardship and every peril, and to surmount every obstacle. His handsome face looked handsomer than ever, all a-glow with the enthusiasm of his feelings, and every feature speaking of ardent hope and strong determination. He seemed to Cecil quite as gallant a gentleman as if he were going out to fight his country's battles.

Then, subsiding a little, he laughed at his own eagerness, and began to talk of the life before him, and to sketch probable experiences in Australia. Cecil was quite surprised when the old butler came in with the wine and water and bed-candles, and she looked incredulously at her watch, and then at the time-piece; but both agreed to tell her that it was eleven o'clock. All the others had been deep in a game of "Poets," so that she and Rupert had had their talk at the piano entirely to themselves.

The next day, when Edith and Rupert were going to the village, he asked her what she thought of Miss Uffadyne.

"I think she is very true and conscientious; but I do not like her so well as Florence."

"I had no idea there was so much real good stuff in her."

"In Florence, do you mean?"

“No ; in Cecil Uffadyne. I used to think her intolerably arrogant and self-opinionated. I always admired her energy, and her determination to do good ; but after she grew up I rather avoided her, because she always seemed to be making a parade of her practicality, and to be forcing upon one some of her numerous crotchets, as I rather impertinently esteemed her philanthropic schemes and her intensely utilitarian propositions.”

“I used to think her rather hard, though I could not but acknowledge her superiority, and I felt in my secret soul rather afraid of her. Frequently it seemed to me that her judgments were harsh, and that to satisfy her requirements would be an impossibility.”

“And you feel different now ?”

“Yes ; either I misunderstood her, or she is softened considerably. Perhaps it is a little of both. I think she feels her brother's conduct very keenly.”

“She well may ; he has behaved shamefully. Whether his conduct was worse as regards Miss Guise or Esther Kendall it is difficult to say ; and now he keeps away from his duties, neglecting his property. I do believe it is very bad for us young men of good families being brought up in the country with nothing to do.”

“And yet you have never been idle.”

“That is more than I dare affirm, Edie ; but my business had certainly no definite object in view. I think in order to succeed in life one ought to have an aim. How much I regret the years I have wasted in mere purposeless, fruitless occupation. How much further on my road should I be if I had only set out earlier. But better late than never. I am only four-and-twenty now. I wish you were going out with me, Edith ; yours is a hard and a dull life at home.”

“I do not so much mind it when I am well, and I am getting quite strong again. I really was very ill when Miss Guise took compassion on me ; but, Rupert, it was Fanny Tucker who first suggested my visit.”

“Bless her, then, for she did you a really good turn. What a remarkably nice girl she is !”

“Nice ? Oh, Rupert, she is infinitely more than that !”

She is so good, the best of everything seems to be in her; but she has had dreadful troubles, though she seldom speaks of them."

"The school of adversity generally produces the finest characters. I hope our own hard training may be of use to us. We have not by any means been reared in the lap of luxury."

"Indeed, no; but it might have been far worse. Rupert, Fanny Tucker seems born to be everybody's comfort. I wish somebody would be a comfort to her."

"Is not Miss Guise a comfort to her? After my Lady Torrisdale I should say her present experiences are celestial."

"So they are, of course. Florence would make any one happy. But I should like some one to fall in love with Fanny and marry her. She is far too good to be left to old-maidism."

"My dear Edith, I believe some of the very choicest specimens of womanhood continue to their dying day as unappropriated blessings."

"Perhaps so; but I want Fanny to be appropriated."

"By whom, my dear Edith? Positively, little sister, you are turning into a match-maker. It's a bad trade, my dear; better give it up."

"Don't be exasperating, Ru. I am only wishing that some people had discrimination enough to estimate a jewel at its true value."

"Do not you see, my dear, that one may acknowledge the costliness of a gem without desiring to wear it? I saw a matchless rose diamond the other day, but it never occurred to me to become the possessor."

"Because you could not; that is quite a different affair."

"Not so much so as you think. Depend upon it Fanny Tucker is not to be had for the asking. That girl has a history; it is written in her face. She has suffered terribly, and she has no more heart to bestow than if she were an old married woman. But, Edith, Fanny Tucker, good and sweet and noble as I am sure she is, would not be my choice."

"Ah! you do not appreciate her as Florence and I do."

"Probably not, you very silly young woman. Why, I never saw her in my life till last evening. But I will tell you, Edith, it is of no use; Fanny Tucker is not fated to be your sister-in-law, unless indeed she wait for Rowley, whose affections at present are concentrated on lollypops and puppies. I suppose you would not have her take up with Cuddie?"

"No, indeed; poor Cuddie!"

"Then I suppose you wished it to be either Lancelot or myself?"

"I am not sure but that Lancelot thinks of somebody."

"And I am tolerably certain that he does, though there have been nothing like confidences, mind you. And you are not to say a word, you understand."

"Of course not. That is understood. Whatever passes between you and me, or between Lance and me, never goes any farther, though on this point Lance has told me no secrets."

"Suppose I tell you a secret?"

"That sort of secret do you mean?"

"Yes, *that sort*, Miss Digby. Suppose I too have thought of some one whom I should like to make Mrs. Rupert Digby?"

"Oh, Ru, have you? Yes, you have; I see it in your face. Is it—is it Cecil?"

"What made you think of Cecil?"

"Why, years ago people called her your little sweetheart, and somehow I always fancied you liked her even when you stigmatised her as 'that strong-minded and disagreeable young woman.' And you were talking with her a long time last night while we were absorbed in our quartettes. Don't tantalise me, Ru. It *is* Cecil, is it not?"

"Yes. I am a greater fool than you supposed, Edith."

"I do not see why that makes you a fool. If I were a young man I should prefer Fanny Tucker, though she is poor, and certainly not so handsome as Cecil; but then, as Mrs. Browning says, 'women cannot choose for men,' and—well, I will not grumble—'*chacun à son goût*.'"

"And my '*goût*' is Cecil most decidedly. I believe I

have cared for her these eight years. I as good as told her so once ; it was the day I was seventeen I remember. She had just come home from Paris, and I ventured to make a small statement of my sentiments in true boyish fashion ; but she snubbed me so viciously at the outset that I turned and fled, leaving my tale half untold. My pride was so mortified, she wounded me so cruelly, she treated me so thoroughly as a blundering schoolboy, that I did my very best to hate her, and for a long time I thought I had succeeded. Afterwards you know there was little intercourse between the Grange and the Chenies, though Oswald and Lancelot still continued fast friends. I thought I had quite forgotten my boyish folly, and that Cecil Uffadyne was no more to me than one of the village girls ; but last night I found out my mistake—that is, it dawned upon me last night—such things dawn at all times, Edie—that I did care for her still, and that somehow I always had cared. And now I come to the conclusion that I shall never care for anybody else.”

“Have you told her so ?”

“Not I ! I may be a fool, but I am not a madman.”

“If you are not to tell her, what is the use of caring for her ?”

“Cannot you see, Edith ? I am a poor fellow going out to Australia to make my fortune—if *I can*. Cecil has a handsome fortune of her own, and the Chenies is settled upon her. I am not the man to go and hang up my hat ; I could not do it, Edith ; I could not be dependent on my wife.”

“Because you spoke to Cecil it would not follow that you should at once marry her, relinquishing your Australian journey, and straightway hanging up your hat, as you say, at the Chenies !”

“No, indeed ; Cecil would be the first to despise me, if I thought of such a thing. If I come back in two or three years’ time, with means of my own, then I might venture to speak. At least she would be constrained to respect my silence, and to appreciate the constancy which kept hers, without any intercourse, and at the distance of so many thousand miles.”

"If I were Cecil I should not like it at all. Rupert, if you really do care for her, I think you ought to tell her before you go. Besides, she very likely guesses; we women have a sort of intuition on these subjects that generally reveals the truth; and if you go away without speaking she will conclude that she is mistaken; and to make such a mistake, or suppose you make it, is intolerably humiliating."

"Really, Edith, you speak with authority; have you had experiences of your own?"

"Not the smallest; but I am a woman, and I know what it must be to have to convict one's self of so wretched a blunder."

"But Cecil cannot guess. I have not said a word that could mean anything beyond mere friendship; and we have known each other all our lives. On the contrary, I am convinced that she would be excessively astonished if I were to go to her and finish the story which was so inauspiciously interrupted seven years ago."

"It would not be the same story, Ru; it would be something altogether different. You were a boy then, and Cecil was a girl; and you were for ever quarrelling. What you have to tell her now is quite another thing."

"It may be; it is, I know. Still I feel that I must postpone the telling till I return from Australia. I cannot have the presumption; I must leave her free. But what folly I am talking! As if there were any probability of her accepting—and I know how much she has despised me."

"Well! I will say no more, only I think you *ought* to speak. If I were in Cecil's place, I should feel myself greatly wronged."

"How can she feel herself wronged if she guesses nothing, and if, as is most probable, she would contemptuously reject my suit?"

"She would not be contemptuous; I do not know what it is, but something has crushed Cecil's pride. She is so gentle now with Florence; as for Fanny Tucker, she defers to her continually."

"Lance used to say that if Cecil once learned humility *she would be the finest creature in the world. If only her*

indomitable pride and her tiresome self-assertion could be got rid of, there would be few to equal her."

"So, you perceive, there is no danger of incurring her contempt; if she say, '*no*,' it will be because she must say it; and it will be said kindly, though firmly, as becomes a right-minded, true-hearted woman."

"You do think it would be '*no*'?"

"I cannot tell; only she has said '*no*' several times, I believe. She has frequently declared that she never intends to marry; she told me, not six weeks ago, that though she respects matrimony, she has herself no vocation for it. She said quite passionately that she could never relinquish her freedom; and she did say that she had never seen the man for whom she could make such terrible sacrifices, nor could she conceive of the existence of any such person."

"That is conclusive; I will keep silence. I shall go away on Monday, I think, instead of Tuesday."

Sunday passed quietly away, and Rupert held no more long conversations with Cecil, and yet Edith felt sure that nearly all he said in the family circle was meant for her. And she said to herself, "She must guess; I should, I am sure." And once she saw Rupert wistfully and covertly regarding Cecil, who was bending with rather a sad countenance over her volume of Robertson's sermons. And Cecil happened to look up and catch the glance, and her own dark eyes fell, and for a minute or more her cheeks were crimson; but she did not look haughty or displeased, and Edith noticed that though she continued to pore over her book, not another page was turned till the bells struck out and it was time to get ready for afternoon church.

"She does guess," said Edie to herself, "and it will hurt her very much if Ru go away without a word." All that evening Cecil appeared restless, but she talked fast with Florence about some scheme for reading with the younger servants on Sunday evenings, and she took great pains to make out a list of such books as she had found suitable on similar occasions at the Chenies. But the old dictatorial tone was dropped, and advice was tendered modestly, and almost timidly. Florence asked her counsel, and it was calmly

given ; but there was no self-assumption, no arrogant laying down of laws self-framed and self-endorsed. Florence herself could hardly believe that this was the same Cecil from whose self-sufficiency and love of command she had once endured so much.

“ Oh, if only Oswald could be changed,” she said to herself ; “ if he could lay aside the baser parts of his nature, giving free scope to those nobler qualities which old habits keep suppressed.” Though he could be nothing now to her, it would make her happier to know that he was living worthily, and doing a man’s—nay, a Christian’s—duty by his fair inheritance of Guise, which was now suffering all the evils of absenteeism. But she put the thought away, for whenever she allowed her mind to dwell upon the past, with its mingled sweets and bitters, there was an unuttered moan, and her heart cried mutely once more, “ Oh, Oswald ! my Oswald ! ”

Rupert read and talked to Fanny Tucker, chiefly about the Reformation in France, and Edith listened or joined in the conversation, while Mrs. Lester dozed in her chair by the fire, and woke up every now and then and diligently resumed the perusal of her *Sunday at Home*, which was supposed to be her staple literature.

Every one seemed very tired, and glad when the evening came to a close. It was something new for Cecil to seem wearied, and Florence feared she was not well. Oswald’s sister had become strangely dear to her since Oswald himself had left her ; and before putting out her own candle she went to Cecil’s room to see if she was quite comfortable. Cecil sat half undressed before the fire, and she started up and laughed when Florence came in.

“ I do believe I was dreaming,” she said. “ I want Miss Smith to keep me in order : she would have brushed my hair and put it up half an hour ago ; ” and Cecil began tugging unmercifully at her wealth of long, glossy raven hair, and grumbling at the trouble it gave her. She declined conversation, however, and pleaded sleepiness, so Florence was fain to retire, feeling not at all easy respecting her cousin. She called on Fanny as she made her way along the gallery.

to her own room, and Fanny was already in bed, but not at all sleepy ; and to her Florence confided her apprehensions. There was something so unwonted about Cecil that she was really frightened. "Could she be going to have an illness?" asked Florence. "Well, if she were, better she should be laid up at Little Guise than at the Chenies, left to the tender mercies of Miss Smith—I beg her pardon, Miss Smyth ;"—of whom Miss Guise had not a high opinion.

Fanny roused herself a little and sat up in bed. "I do not think Cecil is quite well," she said, distinctly.

"Ah, I thought not," replied Florence, anxiously. "Should she have advice, do you think? Ought I to send for Mr. Milsom to-morrow morning?"

"My dear Flossy, Mr. Milsom would be of no more service to her than that smart little page of his. Cecil's complaint is mental."

"Fanny, you do not mean——"

"Yes, I do mean. Cecil is in love Flossy! I know the symptoms—woe is me! You had better leave her alone ; no good ever comes of interfering in such cases. I sometimes think if *we* had been left alone ;—pshaw, what nonsense I am talking! But leave her alone, Florence. Cecil is quite capable of managing her own affairs."

"Can it be Rupert Digby?"

"Of course it is Rupert Digby ; and there have been passages before, or I am greatly mistaken."

"I do believe you are right. Ah, Fanny, nothing would do Cecil so much good as to be honestly, rationally, yet at the same time thoroughly '*in love!*' It would complete the softening and mellowing process that has been going on all this winter. It would make a splendid *woman* of her. What can I do?"

"*Nothing*, emphatically nothing! People like Cecil and Rupert do not bear meddling with. Only, if they try to get alone together, let them. I wouldn't make an opportunity, but if they took one I would take care that no one should disturb them. And you can pray for them, Flossy—pray for God's blessing on Oswald's sister. And now good-night, for I am veritably sleepy, and you look as if you ought to have

been wrapt in downy slumbers an hour ago. Do you know that it is upon the stroke of one? Good-night!"

All Monday morning Rupert was very serious and pre-occupied, and Cecil worked as if for dear life at a gorgeous purse she was producing. Her whole soul seemed to be absorbed in deep blue purse-silk and steel beads, and yet she had by no means a feminine weakness for such busy-idle trifles, as all present knew very well. Just after luncheon she found herself left alone, and then she flung down her silk and her beads, and resigned herself to meditations. Not very pleasant ones either, apparently, for soon she struck one shapely white hand angrily upon the other, and then she bit her full red lips vindictively, and lastly she murmured to herself, "Oh, Cecil Uffadyne! It only needed this. You are the veriest dolt, the weakest idiot who ever drew breath! And you thought yourself such a sensible young woman, did you not, you simpleton? Alas, 'how is the mighty fallen!' Well, I shall come to know myself in time, and a very delightful and soothing study it promises to be. I will go home this evening."

Then Rupert came into the room, and Cecil rashly seized her crotchet-hook and her silk, and ran the hook into her finger.

"You cannot work any more," he said, presently, "because your finger bleeds. You had better wrap your handkerchief round your hand, and put on your seal-skin, and take your muff, and come with me to the river-side."

And Cecil obeyed, as if submission had been the rule of her life; and again they talked of Australia, of the long voyage, of the new life over there, and of the hopes that Rupert cherished.

"It will be a hard life doubtless," said Cecil; "but I envy you. I often wish I had to work for my living; but that is wrong of course, the thing is to do one's very utmost in the station in which it has pleased God to place you."

"You do not mean that no one should ever try to alter his station, to take a better position?"

"Of course not. We ought always to do the very best for ourselves that we can. 'That station of life in which it has

pleased God to place me,' as the Catechism says, does not always mean that station in which I or any other person was born, but that station to which by the leadings of His Providence, He manifestly directs me. If the stupid doctrine which some people preach had been fully carried out, your station and mine at this moment would be that of barbarians. We should be attired in undressed skins, our faces and hands would be grotesquely painted, and our respective residences would be wattled or clay huts, boasting of heather beds, and unhewn stumps of trees by way of seats."

"And if you had had to work, what would you have done, I wonder?"

"I would not have turned governess or made dresses or bonnets. I would far rather have been housemaid or wash-erwoman. But I would have gone into business. I would have tried to save a little capital, supposing I had none, and I would have worked it to the best of my ability. I flatter myself I should make an excellent business woman. I like to hear talk about invoices, and bills of lading, and consignments."

"Cecil, I wish you were not rich."

"I am not; I have the Chenies, and sufficient income to keep it up comfortably. If I were at all extravagant I should soon be in difficulties. But it is not kind of you to wish I had nothing, if that is what you mean. On the whole I daresay it is best that my bread and cheese is found for me. Earning one's living in perspective and in reality are widely different things, I fancy."

"Cecil, I had resolved not to speak before I went away; but I feel that I must. If you were not as rich as you are, I should ask you to give me a promise before I left England."

"And being as rich as I am you will not?"

"I scarcely dare, it is too presumptuous—and yet I am sorely tempted. There is no scorn in your eyes, Cecil, and you do not look displeased; yet I think you must know what it is I want you to promise me."

"Perhaps I do; but you must tell me outright, Rupert. I am not going to help you."

"And you are not angry, not confounded at my impudence?"

"That depends upon what you want. If you wish me to go out to Australia with you, and do your washing, and superintend a dairy-farm, I think I must decline."

"I only want you to promise to think kindly of me while I am away, to write to me occasionally, and, lastly—here comes the rub, Cecil—to marry me when I come back, with an income equal to your own. Now then, say yes, or bid me go away and see your face no more."

"Must I say either of these things?"

"Cecil, don't play with me. I cannot bear suspense just now."

"Well then——yes."

"You don't mean it, Cecil?"

"I did mean it; but I will retract if you like. It might be better for you that you should go away a disengaged young man. There are heiresses to be had in Australia, and you have a handsome face, and a good ancient name in the old country."

"All the heiresses in Australia may die old maids for me, Cecil. I only want you. Do you know, though we were always apparently at feud, I believe I have been caring for you these seven years. Cecil, you have made me very happy."

"I hope I shall make you happy your life through, Rupert; but I am not sure that you have done a good thing for yourself. Do you know that I am naturally vain, imperious, self-satisfied, and not too sweet tempered?"

"I know you are the only woman in the world I care to marry. I will run the risk, and take you, temper and all."

The lovers lingered so long by the river side that it was dark before they reached home. Florence met Cecil at the top of the stairs; both were carrying candles, and the light fell full on Cecil's face; it looked guilty, but demure—and, oh, so quietly content.

"What have you been doing?" asked Florence.

"I have secured you a new cousin, my dear; and I have promised to be Edie's sister, that is all. Am I not a most considerate young woman? But what will Oswald say?"

CHAPTER LV.

IN THE LAMPLIGHT.

AGAIN the Helmsley woods were leafed in all their fresh summer beauty and bright with summer flowers, and again the glorious tints of autumn fell on their umbrageous growth, and again the sere leaves rustled on the damp, cold earth, and the brambles purpled in the early frosts, and winter once more asserted his icy sway. It was a year and more since Rupert had sailed to Australia, and Cecil and Edith received letters by every mail—letters almost exulting in their tone, for he was succeeding beyond his most sanguine expectations. It was nearly a year too since Oswald came back to Guise and took up the duties of his position. He made no protestations and registered no vows, which Cecil interpreted as a hopeful sign, but he quietly took in hand the tasks he had so long neglected. He listened patiently to all complaints, examined all accounts, and redressed grievances, which rather abounded on the estate, partly owing to the interregnum occasioned by his own avoidance of the place, and partly through the lapse of lawful authority consequent on Mr. Guise's absence and long illness. He began to be talked about as a landlord and to be extolled as a magistrate, some of his neighbours remarking that wealth and position were really doing young Uffadyne good. He seemed at last to comprehend that life was not a boy's game, nor the world a playground, but a vast area on which must be fought out the never-ending battle of right and wrong; also, he was convinced that a fair inheritance like Guise involved serious and manifold responsibilities, which he dare no longer hesitate to assume.

Florence and Fanny were abroad with Mrs. Lester. As soon as Edith returned to the Grange they had arranged for a tour in Germany, and through the Tyrol to Venice. Unfortunately the Eugène Bethunes were already at Geneva when they reached Paris, so the yearning desire of Esther's heart could not be gratified. But she heard constantly from

Cecil, who had developed since her engagement into a very charming correspondent, and Esther knew pretty well what was passing at the Grange and at Chilcombe, and how Oswald was gladdening his sister's heart, and how wonderfully Rupert was getting on at Brisbane. Mrs. King, too, sent her one lengthy epistle, homely in its composition, but racy in its style, overflowing with motherly kindness, and brimming full of news about everybody in whom Esther was supposed to be interested. Linda Smith had become pupil teacher, Anne Culverwell was apprenticed to a first-class milliner at Stannington, and Mary Murrell had gone as assistant teacher into a large school in Midlandshire, with a view to becoming in due time mistress at Chilcombe, the Frumpington woman being decidedly ineligible and "very hard to put up with." Esther knew that Cecil had parted with Miss Smith, and that she had taken in her place one of the elder school-girls; but she did not know that the amiable Amelia Matilda had been dismissed for backbiting, and general and particular infraction of the ninth commandment. With all the venom of a malicious, envious temper, and all the spite of a low, vulgar mind, she had circulated terrible reports to Esther's disadvantage. Her sister-in-law, Belinda's mother, gave such help as she could, and at last the slanders came to Cecil's ears, and her wrath was stirred up, and she set herself to investigate the whole affair, and so trace to their source the unfounded rumours which pervaded not only Chilcombe, but Helmsley and Guise and Little Guise as well.

They all resolved themselves into two or three astounding declarations of Smith's—mere gratuitous lies which she seemed to have invented purely to gratify her own hatred of Esther, whom she simply detested as her mistress's favourite. It had gone the round of the neighbourhood that Esther was living in Paris under Mr. Oswald's protection, and that such an arrangement had been contemplated before she left England. It was proved that Smith had originated the report, repeating to several people in confidence the monstrous untruth. Cecil compelled her to unsay all that she *had said*, and she made her write a full confession of her

own guilt. When Oswald learned how Esther's fair name had been for a while blurred by his selfishness and folly he bitterly regretted the part he had taken ; and the humiliation he experienced in finding himself sometimes compelled to testify to the honour of one whom he deeply revered was by no means the least part of the discipline which was slowly but surely correcting the worst traits of his character. His only hope was that Esther might never hear of the causeless shame to which, by his former persecution of her, she had been subjected. Moreover, he did not, as he would once have done, rush madly and blindly to her defence, perhaps in very rashness injuring irremediably the cause he defended ; but he took counsel with Mr. and Mrs. King, and with the rector, and contented himself with a simple, sober, outspoken refutation of the charges laid to his door. The affair quickly came to an end ; the Smiths, threatened with punishment, fully retracted their statements ; Esther's character was fully vindicated, and more than vindicated, for the nobleness and quiet strength of her conduct under so strong a test came fully to light, and as the way of the world is, the very people who had been busiest in spreading abroad the false and cruel reports were now most anxious to sing her praises and to proclaim their enthusiastic admiration of her virtues !

Esther never knew how she had been slandered, nor how fully she was acquitted ; it was never disclosed to her that she had been for awhile the heroine of Chilcombe and the adjacent villages, while she, all unconscious, explored with her friends the beauties of Interlachen. It was well for her that she was kept in ignorance ; the bitter accusations would have well-nigh broken her heart, and the applause which came afterwards would scarcely have made amends. For once, it happened that the person who was solely to blame had to bear the punishment ; for Oswald really suffered when he found how great a mischief he had caused, while Esther went peacefully on her way, growing continually stronger and happier, and winning fresh love and deeper esteem as weeks and months passed on.

Florence and Fanny spent the winter at Montauban, for

Florence was not quite strong, and it was thought wiser that she should not return to England just before the cold weather set in. Little Guise was therefore still shut up.

Again it was a bright April day, and the Bethunes were once more in Paris. Esther had been driven in the *Bois* with some young cousins of Madame and with her two elder pupils ; and when she returned she was met by her little pet, Melanie, who told her that her *maman* was talking with an English *monsieur* just arrived from England, and that he would stay to dinner. Esther took little notice of the information, for she was hurrying to her room, there being only a short time to dress ; the drive on the *Bois* had been just too far. A very few minutes afterwards Madame herself appeared, desiring to know what Esther intended to wear.

It was no unusual thing for Madame Adèle to superintend Esther's toilet, for she was a thorough Frenchwoman, and looked upon *la toilette* as a solemn institution, even as Monsieur her husband looked upon the daily dinner as an event not to be slighted or trifled with, but to be duly considered and carefully assisted at, as the profoundest of social duties. But Esther had improved so much under Madame's tuition of a whole year and a half that she rarely interfered, except upon occasions of importance.

"Esther, *mon enfant*," said Madame, as she entered, herself attired perfectly *comme il faut*, "what are you wearing this evening?"

"I thought of my new white muslin with the rose-coloured ribbons," said Esther, who was rapidly braiding her hair ; "but as you have company, Madame, I will, if you prefer it, wear the silver-grey poplin, your own kind birthday present."

"I hardly know," replied Madame, surveying her critically : "*Mais, oui*, you are in very good looks to-night, the drive has given you a fine colour, and you have an air brilliant ; wear your pretty white muslin and the rose ribbons ; I will send Marie with a flower for your hair. I wish you to look well at dinner, *mon enfant* !"

Esther dressed tranquilly ; she was quite accustomed to receive such intimations from Madame, whom she endeavoured

on this point to please, as far as in her lay, though sometimes Esther was altogether weary of ringing the changes on black and white and grey, and the few colours which Madame permitted as "becoming;" on flowers in the hair, and flowers in the sash, and on braids and plaits and ringlets. It was a positive relief when Madame herself told her what to wear; it saved an immensity of trouble. Ah! if Madame Eugène Bethune had only seen the torn alpaca, the shabby little black apron, and the ungraceful *coiffure* of those sad Queen Square days, which seemed now to have faded away like a miserable dream!

Madame had told her to make haste, so she lost no time; but when she descended she found the drawing-room, as she imagined, empty. No; not quite empty! One gentleman was standing in the recess formed by the bay-window, looking out upon Madame's orangery; and hearing the rustle of Esther's muslin skirts, he turned. It was Lancelot Digby.

If Esther had known whom she was going to encounter, she would probably have felt shy and constrained; but meeting thus suddenly the bright, keen glance, and the radiant smile she remembered so well, she involuntarily put out both her hands, exclaiming, "Is it possible—Mr. Digby?" The next moment she blushed deeply, and would have retreated; but her hands were held fast, and the poet's face she had first seen under the pine-tree on Guiseley Hill was bent over hers.

Madame and Monsieur soon entered the room, and very soon dinner was announced, and Lancelot was taking her into the *salle-à-manger*, and she was sitting by his side, seemingly quite at ease, but in reality trifling with her soup-plate, without much cognizance of what it contained.

"'Grey and Gold' is written, and, what is more, it is published," said Lancelot, later in the evening, when, Monsieur having gone off to smoke his nightly cigar in the garden, and Madame having gone no one exactly knew whither, nor on what errand, he and Esther were left alone in the lamplight, among the myrtles and the vases of spring-flowers.

"Really?" she said, dropping her work in her lap; "I

remember so well what you said about it that Sunday evening in the garden at Helmsley, and I have so often wondered whether you would really think it worth while to work the idea into a poem."

"I thought it exceedingly worth while ; but it was some time before I could at all satisfy myself with the lines I produced. I succeeded at last, however, and sent them forth—half reluctantly though ; and popular opinion has taken them up and pronounced them '*the thing!*'"

"I am very glad. And you are well known now ? I heard some English people talking of you last summer as we came down from the Rigi—that is, they were talking of you as an author ; the real Mr. Lancelot Digby they evidently did not know."

"Yes, I have made myself a name at last ; it has been a great struggle and a long struggle, for I have been writing and treating the public to my private thoughts these eight years and more. Thank God, it is over ; my claim to be one of the privileged circle whose books are *read* is at last fully allowed. Two years ago I could not find any one to print my MSS., either prose or verse ; now I may choose my publisher and make my own terms. So much for a name."

And Esther could only say she was glad. He must think her very stupid, she feared ; but still a deep content filled her heart, and she thought how pleasant it was to sit there in the soft, silvery lamplight, among the fragrant flowers, talking with the friend to whom she owed so much, and of whom she had thought so frequently during the year and eight months which had elapsed since they parted at Helmsley. Then they discussed Cecil's engagement, and Lancelot mentioned that a literary friend of his was much attached to Edith. Mrs. Digby was still an invalid, but rather more energetic than of old, and Rosie was growing into quite a capable elder sister.

And then there was a pause, and Esther wondered when Madame would return, and whether she ought not to go and seek her. She was half rising, and folding her strip of embroidery, when Lancelot begged her to stay a little longer to *listen to something* he had come to Paris expressly to say to

her, and for the saying of which Madame Eugène had kindly left them together, having deliberately turned out her submissive husband to fumigate the shrubs in her little *bosquet*.

I need not tell you what it was that Lancelot had to say. He was in a position now to marry, and with his father's full consent, and with Cecil and Edith's best wishes, he had come to ask Esther to be his wife.

"Taking her away just as I had made an eldest daughter of her. It is cruel!" said Madame, smilingly, when she came in an hour later, and saw from Esther's face that Lancelot's wooing had not been in vain.

"Marie will soon be growing up," said Lancelot, consolingly; "and then you will have Hélène and Melanie in turn to settle. Ah, Madame, what trials are before you! But I thank you heartily for taking care of my Esther."

CHAPTER LVI.

OLD SCENES REVISITED.

THOUGH Lancelot declared himself to be in a position to marry, Madame Bethune and Cecil both advised Esther to plead for a year's engagement. Esther was quite young, only nineteen, and she had not begun life very early; it would be good for her to gain a little more of the world's experiences before she became Mrs. Lancelot Digby. Also it would be well that Lancelot should see his way clearly, and strengthen and widen his literary foundations before he entered upon the manifold responsibilities which the wedded state involves. Of course the young man resisted vehemently. He was making quite enough to justify him in marrying at once, he told his friend Adèle; and Esther was quite old enough, and if he were satisfied with her exactly as she was, why should he not take her to himself without more ado? "Besides," he argued, "I am not nineteen. In a few weeks I shall be twenty-seven, and I do not wish to waste the best years of my life in single blessedness, or unblessedness."

rather ; for I must confess that I am heartily tired of living *en garçon* in London."

"And very right you should be," pertinently replied Madame ; "it is only your *mauvais sujet* who heartily enjoys a bachelor's life. Good young men always want to be married."

"And I, being a good young man, want to be married, Madame Adèle."

"Ah ! but you must wait, *mon enfant*. It is not that the good young men get married the moment they wish it. It is that they desire to marry ; but it does them good to wait. What is worth having is worth waiting for, and you will have to wait for Esther just one leetel year."

"And I had quite decided to be married in June."

"Bah ! and now it is almost May. I tell you young ladies cannot be married in so great haste. Esther must have her *trousseau*."

"That is always the way," replied Lancelot, it must be confessed a little testily. "The moment you propose marriage to a girl she, on her friends for her, begin to talk about her clothes. Of course a bride should have several new dresses and a wreath and a veil. I am sure Esther has some very pretty dresses now ; but if new ones are required, where in the world can they be procured so speedily as in Paris ? Your *modiste* ought to furnish a complete *trousseau* in three days."

"I shall not ask my *modiste* to do anything of the kind. If you were going out to India it would be quite another affair ; and Miss Uffadyne and Miss Guise think as I do, so you will not have your Esther till next spring, perhaps not till next summer, and it is of no use frowning and looking like an animal infuriate, for I shall rule in this leetel matter."

And as Esther was content that Madame should rule, and seemed rather relieved than otherwise to leave the disposal of herself in other hands, Lancelot was obliged to submit, and was actually compelled to own to the wisdom of these arrangements before the time came when he had intended to take possession of his bride.

For there was trouble at Helmsley Grange, a worse trouble than had hitherto visited the old manor house. The Digbys had struggled with grim care and hard, grinding poverty for many a weary year ; but now they were called to stand face to face with shame. Cuddie had left home for nearly a year, and nothing had been heard of him or from him ; his friend Mr. Hellier and he had disappeared one fine morning, Cuddie taking with him not only every scrap of property to which he could lay any possible claim, but a sum of money belonging to his father, which had unfortunately fallen into his hands. Of course Mr. Digby kept this circumstance to himself ; his neighbours only knew that Master Cuthbert had taken himself off without saying good bye, and that he had not gone in any respectable company ; but they were not slow to predicate that he would come to grief before he was many months older.

And, indeed, ere many months had flown, their predictions were most unpleasantly verified. News came of Cuddie's arrest at Liverpool on a charge of forgery, he being also suspected of sundry frauds and conspiracies connected with a certain swindling company, got up chiefly by that very clever young man, Mr. Hellier, the principal office being, as it was affirmed, in London, with "branch associations" in the principal towns throughout the country. Mr. Hellier was "wanted," but was not forthcoming ; he was an adept in evasions as well as in many other small specialities connected with the profession of adventurer ; and certain lynx-eyed detectives, both in London and in Birmingham, were taxing all their ingenuity to discover his whereabouts. In Birmingham he had last been seen, and it was pretty nearly certain that he had not left the country.

The fraudulent firm had called itself "Hellier, Cuthbertson, and Co.," Cuddie signing himself Stephen Cuthbertson, the other man figuring always as Josiah Hellier. The police at once understood that these gentlemen were carrying on business under an *alias*. Cuddie, who was an ingrain liar, had not however much skill in lying ; he liked lying so well that he often told falsehoods when truth would have been equally easy, and have served his purpose quite as well ; but

he had a bad memory—a serious defect in a liar—and he had also a bad temper, and was apt, when displeased, to sputter out half-truths, without any regard to probable consequences. Cuddie could be cunning enough upon such occasions as suited his capacity ; but sagacity he had none, and so he speedily verified the evil auguries of his Helmsley neighbours, and “came to grief!” It was ascertained that Stephen Cuthbertson and Cuthbert Digby were one and the same person. When called to account he began, as “it was his nature to,” to bluster, and use strong language, and in his foolish, unjustifiable rage he said what, for his own sake, had better have been left unsaid, and so lifted the flimsy veil of concealment.

Mr. Digby at once went to Liverpool, and, luckily, the gentleman with whose name the liberty had been taken had married into the family of the first Mrs. Digby ; he was, therefore, easily prevailed upon to relinquish legal proceedings, on the condition that Cuddie should immediately leave the country, and not return to it for a stipulated period. And, accordingly, Mr. Cuthbert sailed away for somewhere in the far Mexican territories, where he is to this day expatiating among buffalo herds, and running away whenever a skirmish with Indians seems impending. But this trouble was keenly felt at Helmsley, and Lancelot was well content that his wedding should not take place in the midst of so much sorrow, and humiliation, and disgrace.

And in the autumn the Eugène Bethunes came to London, so that the separation was not so entire as had been anticipated, and Lancelot and Esther could frequently enjoy each other's society. The Bethunes rented a house in Eaton Square, and some weeks passed before it occurred to Esther to visit her former haunts in the west-central district. But one day, having a few hours at her disposal, she suddenly determined to set off by herself, and inspect at least the outside of the house where she had known so much misery, and where first a vision of hope, a foreshadowing of better things to come, had visited her in the person of Florence Guise. She walked up into Oxford Street and took a *Bank omnibus*, which put her down at the bottom of Southampton

Row. How strange it seemed to be once more on that familiar ground, to see the well-known steps, to catch that well-remembered glimpse of Bloomsbury Square, to be actually taking the turning which led straight up to the grim, dark, ugly church of St. George the Martyr. And there was the dull, dreary square, with its nearly leafless plane trees, its mossy walks, and its damp-stained statue of the good Queen Anne; and—yes, there was the house, looking dirtier and more untidy than ever, with an organ grinder and white mice in front, and two wretched little children sitting on the doorstep, and quarrelling over a small handful of broken victuals.

But the house itself was to let. Great bills stared upon Esther from the windows and from the walls. Some of them announced that “this desirable tenement” was vacant, and that particulars might be ascertained at the offices of an agent near at hand, or—*within*! Other of the bills stated that a sale of household furniture, “the effects of a gentleman leaving the neighbourhood,” would take place on a certain day specified. And below the name of the auctioneer, and swelled into a list of some importance, was a catalogue of Mr. Hellicar’s household goods, beginning with the shattered chairs and tables in the garrets, and ending with incomprehensible and mysterious “sundries” in the back kitchen. The windows of the dining-room and drawing-room were curtainless. There was a look of non-habitation about the desolate house, though a pail of dirty water and a tub of cinders standing in the area, and a pewter pot hung upon the rails, seemed to testify to the existence of some one who burnt coals, and had beer from the public-house round the corner. Where were the Hellicars? Esther felt strongly inclined to pull the bell and make a few inquiries respecting them.

While she hesitated a door was opened below; a black, touzled, head, adorned with something green and red, and a round, rosy, shining face, appeared suddenly on the area steps, and then there was a shout that echoed round the Square, and a voice crying, “Blessid saints, and it *is* she! She’s own blessid self, growed into a lady, a rale, beautiful, spanking lady, with a rale silk gownd, and a muff, and the purtiest

little boots upon her purty feet ! Good luck to the day ! Och ! but it's rale good to see you with these eyes, Miss Esther, darlint ! Come yeay in ! come yeay in ! The praties are just done, and there's a nate rasher all reddy to be fried !”

“ But, Biddy,” said Esther, delighted to see her old friend, “ how can I come in if you don't open the door ? And the area gate is fastened too, or I would run down to you this minute.”

“ Hear her, the jewel !” cried Biddy, in ecstasy. “ She's come back a rale lady, and she'd run down thim steep airy steps to the likes ov' me—Biddy O'Flanigan that was—Biddy Mulloney that is !”

And then the red ribbons and the green gown fluttered away, and in less time than Biddy used to take to think about it in the old period, when lodgers and their callers rang and thundered—the door was opened, and Esther was almost dragged into the hall, from which the lamp, the hat-stand, and the floorcloth had disappeared ; and her hands—for Biddy took both in her horny grasp—were nearly wrung off ; while tears of joy ran down the blooming cheeks of the stout young Irishwoman, who kept declaring that she had never seen anything like it, “ no, niver ! since the day when they waked mee father—rest his sowl !—and I haven't had a mass said for him these nine months, bad cess to me for that same !—when they waked him in the ould counthry, and Dick Bryan, a lad that was friendly like, went an' lept into the grave, and swor' he'd be berrid too ; and the folks did say it was the grief ov' his true Irish heart—but I knowed it wor the whisky, Miss Esther, for he'd bin takin' sups ov' the crathur out ov' a broken teacup from the moment they straked the corpse, and began howlin' !” Which characteristic little story Esther had heard before, but she failed to perceive Biddy's association of ideas in the present instance.

The upstairs rooms were all empty, so Biddy led the way into the kitchen, in which some remnants of furniture remained. There was a small fire in a very dirty grate, and some potatoes, lying in a heap of hot ashes ; also Esther perceived a strong smell of tobacco-smoke, which caused her to *remember that Biddy had alluded to a change of name.*

“And are you married, Biddy?” she inquired, when she had taken the seat of honour, and refused her hostess’s offer of a pot of stout, which could be fetched from the public round the corner, “mighty convenient.”

Esther thought it was a pity that public-houses, with their temptations, should be so convenient.

“Shure, an’ I’m marrid!” replied the delighted Biddy; “that is to say, I’ve entered into the holy and blessid estate of *matteromoney*, and a vary holy and blessid estate I do find it, Miss Esther.”

“I am very glad to hear it,” Esther answered; “but, Biddy, you said your new name was Mulloney, did you not? Have you married your minister? I remember how fond you were of talking about Father Mulloney.”

“Now, Miss Esther, yer jist puttin’ yer jests upon me. But *asthore, mavourneen*, ye shouldn’t jest about sacrid things, and a preast is about the most sacridest thing in creation! Why, Miss Esther, *agra*, the blessed Father Mulloney is above all carnal thowts; he’s like the angils ov’ heaven; and he’d as soon jump from the top ov’ the tall quare thing they call the Moniment as commit *matteromoney*. There’s tin commandments for the layerty, sez he; but there’s eliven for the holy preasthood, and the elivinth is—thou shalt not commit *matteromoney*. So *matteromoney* with a preast isn’t lawful; it ’ud be a deadly sin, Miss Esther, a sin past praying for; and Father Mulloney, bless him, he looks at women jest as other men looks at Queen Anne done in stone out yonder. Sez he, sez the father, I know two sorts ov’ women, and I know no other; and them two sorts is pinnitents and saints! No, Miss Esther, I’m marrid to Larry Mulloney, a boy from the ould counthry; there’s many a Mulloney out there. Look at me rale gold weddin’ ring!” and crossing her large, rough, red hands, she proudly displayed the badge of her subservience. She had worn it about two months. Then she wanted to know if Esther were not going to be married, and was charmed to hear that such really was the case, and she insisted upon knowing all about it; but was rather disappointed to hear that the gentleman was not a lord, and that he did not ride about London streets in a carriage of his

own. Biddy had always pictured Esther coming back to Queen Square in a glorified chariot resembling the Lord Mayor's state coach, drawn by four milk-white horses, with two tall, bewigged footmen hanging on behind. If Esther had announced herself as betrothed or married to the Crown Prince of Crim Tartary, Biddy would have implicitly believed her, and thought it only the right sort of thing, and just what she had always expected.

But Esther wanted to know about the Hellicars, and Biddy told all she knew. Things had gone from bad to worse with them ; Dick was gone nobody knew where ; Mr. Hellicar's commission business came to nothing, and lodgers refused to come, or coming refused to remain, "which was no wonder," said Biddy, emphatically ; "for what wid the pranks that was played upon 'em, on their wines and on their mate, and on their ivrythink, and the private keys the misthress did keep to all the drawers and cupboards, and the bad cookin', and the childer always a howlin' like mad, and the nasty animals as did walk about the beds, I just don't wonder that none ov' them stayed a day longer than their week ! "

Esther did not wonder either ; the Hellicars had certainly gone down hill at express speed since her departure. So Biddy went on to relate how they got too poor to keep a church mouse, much less a servant, and how she left them. And directly afterwards she heard that there was an execution in the house, and very soon all their things were sold, and at this present moment Mr. Hellicar was in Whitecross prison, and Mrs. Hellicar and the children were in lodgings "up a three-pair back," in a street behind Red Lion Square.

Esther did not hesitate, though the dull autumn day was drawing to its close ; she knew the neighbourhood too well to be afraid of invading any part of it, and greatly to Bridget's dismay she departed in search of the luckless Hellicars, after accepting at her hands a steaming hot cup of boiling and utterly undrinkable tea without milk. Esther was vainly trying to take little sips, while Biddy recommended "a drap o' the craythur" as being better to keep the cowl out, and she was at her wits' ends as to the disposal of the

draught when luckily the door-bell rang, and, Biddy's back once turned, her visitor quietly emptied her cup into the coal-cellar, to which of course she knew the road.

With no small difficulty she found Mrs. Hellicar. She was living with her children in one wretchedly close and meanly furnished room. Lizzie had shot up into a tall slip of a girl; she was very pale and thin, looking indeed half-starved, and she was distressingly untidy. Her face wore a most unpleasant expression, and her bold airs and unmaidenly tone inexpressibly shocked Esther. She talked strangely too; Esther was afraid that she was coolly resolving to "go to the bad," and she determined to consult Madame Bethune and implore her to help her to save the miserable child from the fate on which she seemed about to rush; for Lizzie was but a child—she had scarcely passed her fifteenth birthday. Fanny was weak and ill; something had come to her spine, her mother said, and as proper doctoring could not be had for her, she would probably be humpbacked and a cripple for life. The little girl looked wistfully at Esther as she heard her doom pronounced with a conclusive "Please God to take her, it would be a mercy." The old baby and the new baby were fretful, pining little things, suffering from naturally feeble constitutions, and further injured by bad air, want of sufficient and wholesome food, and occasional doses of soothing syrup, as made up from the prescription of a disreputable local chemist. Poor little Tommy's fits had been too much for him, and he was quietly sleeping in the nearest cemetery. Happy little Tommy! thought Esther, as she looked at the three miserable little ones, and at their still more miserable elder sister.

Mrs. Hellicar was full of complaints, upbraiding and almost cursing her unlucky husband, bewailing her own hapless lot, and loudly declaring her inability to pay her week's rent, or to buy another loaf for the children, if Providence did not somehow befriend her. Esther at once gave her all she had in her purse, only leaving herself a shilling for omnibus fare.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Hellicar, sourly, pocketing—with alacrity, however—the one golden sovereign and the half-crowns that

Esther poured into her hand ; “ it’s a fine thing that I should come to be beholden to you, Esther Kendall—to you that hadn’t a halfpenny to bless yourself with, nor a friend in the world till those fine stuck-up Guises took a fancy to you ! And now you come here with your silk dress trailing, and your purse full of money, and your ermine muff. Yes, I see it’s *real* ermine, not rabbit-skin ; and that dress never cost less than seven or eight shillings the yard ; and Balmoral boots too ! Well, I never ! but some folks go up and some go down, only it’s all been going down with *me* ever since I married your poor, foolish, unlucky uncle, and I *might* have married to my carriage and pair, and my own maid ! You’ve had luck, you have ; but it won’t last always ; you’ll find fortune’s the ficklest thing under the sun, and you’ll see trouble some day, I don’t doubt, for all your present grandeur. I hope it’s honestly come by, that’s all ! ”

Esther’s face flushed, and Lizzie laughed a wicked little laugh, and winked at her, as much as to say she understood it all. She paused for a moment to restrain her anger and disgust, and then she said—“ I have nothing in the world, thank God, that is not honestly come by. Everything I possess has been bought with money lawfully earned, or it has been the gift of dear and generous friends, whom I pray God to bless and reward for all their goodness to me. I have found friends everywhere—the Guises, as you know, Miss Cecil Uffadyne, kind, motherly, sensible Mrs. King ; and as for Madame Bethune, with whom I am now living, teaching her little girls, she treats me rather as an indulged eldest daughter, or a petted younger sister, than a mere governess. She is almost too indulgent, too lavish and liberal in her gifts to me, who can only repay her with love and gratitude.”

“ And you haven’t got a sweetheart, I suppose ? Why Lizzie there has had three already.”

“ I am sorry to hear you say so, for such a child ought not to be troubled with sweethearts. For myself, I am going to be married in the spring, all being well.”

Mrs. Hellicar’s sallow face grew yellow with bitter spleen and envy, and angry Lizzie would have liked to beat the

well-dressed, handsome young lady, who so quietly announced her engagement.

"Is he a gentleman?" asked Lizzie, with her most exasperating sneer.

"He is. As true a gentleman as ever lived."

"And will you have your carriage, and men-servants, and your feathers and diamonds, and go to court?"

Esther smiled; she was feeling quite calm again, and full of pity for those unhappy creatures who were persistently putting from them all that could truly comfort and relieve them in their dire necessity.

"No," she replied, "I shall have no carriage at present. I am not going to marry a rich man—that is, not rich as the world counts richness—but oh, thank my God, who has given me all that heart can desire, that he is rich, *very* rich in goodness, and nobility of nature, and genius—yes, genius! I shall be the wife of a great man, Mrs. Hellicar, and in his love I am rich indeed."

"May I ask his name? I suppose it is no secret?"

"No, I have no secrets; I need not have any. I have nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of. But I have much to be proud of, and I confess I am proud of my lover, Lancelot Digby."

"The poet? You don't mean to say it's *him*!" cried Lizzie, in extreme astonishment.

"I do say so, Lizzie. Why not? What do you mean?"

"Why he is *somebody*! I've been out doing a little work lately for ladies, and I heard them talking about this Digby man and his wonderful poems, and saying how popular he was; and they spoke of meeting him at some evening party, as if it would be the greatest event of their lives. Why they said the leading magazines, the *Grosvenor*, the *Fleet Street*, and the *Month by Month*, were all but quarrelling to secure him to themselves, and were outbidding each other like people at an auction. Is that the same man—*your* beau?"

"Yes; Mr. Digby writes for two of the magazines you mention, but he publishes independently of magazines, and the publishers are only too glad to secure him on his own terms."

"Oh, my!" said Lizzie, almost respectfully. "Well, I should not mind marrying an author myself, but I'd rather have a play actor; I've some thought of going on the stage. I hate stitching at other people's clothes. What brought you such luck, I wonder?"

"It isn't *luck*, Lizzie; it is God's goodness. I was taught to trust in Him, to make Him my first and my all; I have trusted in Him, and all is well. I daresay He will try me from time to time, sending trouble as He knows I need it; but the trial will be sent in love, and strength will be freely given. This I know: in Him I have and do trust; therefore I shall never be confounded."

Lizzie looked mystified, and Mrs. Hellicar remarked that Esther had no right to God's promises if she were not *converted*. "The unregenerate nature," said Mrs. Hellicar, sighing deeply, "has no part in God's covenant."

Esther would not argue the point, it was of no use; and the old, cant phrases could not hurt her now.

Presently she got up to go away, promising to come again or send before long, and inquiring also when she could see Mr. Hellicar. It was nearly a week before she did see him, and then she found him—*dying*!

"You are come to heap coals of fire upon my head," he said, gloomily, when Esther sat down on his bed, and gave him grapes, and bathed his forehead with water and eau-de-Cologne.

"No, no," she said, gently, almost tenderly, "I am so glad to come to you, uncle. You were always kind to me; you stood my friend in the old time, you know, often and often."

"Child," he returned—and his breath came gaspingly, and he held her hand tightly—"I never was your friend; I was your enemy—the enemy of the fatherless, the orphan, the friendless. You were not quite destitute, Esther; your father left you nearly a hundred a year, and I promised him when he was on his deathbed to take care of you and of your little income, and to do the best I could for you, as in God's sight, and as I should answer to him before God when we met again in the world beyond the grave. Now I am going to meet him, and what shall I say? I have broken every

promise. I wanted money for some of my schemes, I wanted it badly, and I took yours ; it was so left that, with a little management, I could do it. I took it all, child, and I soon lost it all. For ever so long I meant to replace it as soon as I could, but I never had half the money in my hands. God punished me for wronging the orphan, for breaking faith with the dead, and I could not thrive. Perhaps I was a fool, perhaps I overreached myself, but I too was defrauded, and every venture I made proved a failure. Dick was worse than I, and his was the stronger nature ; he bullied me, and we were soon in deep waters. Then he left me alone to breast the storm, to sink or swim, as it might be. Of course I sank, and now I am sinking deeper still—sinking into the world of lost spirits.”

“Oh, no, no, uncle ! Never mind my money ; I don’t care one bit about it. It was wrong of course, yes, very wrong, and God must have been angry with you ; but He forgives. He sent His Son to save. Go to Him now ; it is not too late.”

“Too late ! too late !” was all he answered. All that night and all the next day Esther watched by the unhappy man ; she read to him words of peace and hope ; she told him of the dying thief ; she prayed with him and for him ; and the prison-nurse, a good, kind, Christian woman, joined her prayers with Esther’s. But the pulse grew weaker, and the faint voice fainter, and all through the chill November night, and through the dreary dawn, and through the short, cold, foggy, dismal day, he could only moan at intervals, “*Too late ! too late !*”

“Oh, no !” Esther responded to the last. “Too late for this life, uncle, but not too late for the new life that is coming !” Once he said, very slowly and with difficulty, for his breath now came in only painful gasps, “Perhaps so ! God be merciful to me a sinner.”

And so he died—the man who chose evil instead of good, who turned from angel’s food that he might feast on dust and ashes. And they had to be content with that poor glimmer of hope, and leave him to the good God, who hears and heeds the lowest penitential moan of the truly contrite heart.

After her husband's death Mrs. Hellicar took to dress-making of an inferior sort, and managed to earn a bare subsistence. Esther often helped her; and to this day the Hellicars, mother and children, are a trouble to her, and a burden from which she cannot entirely free herself. She is very kind to them, very pitiful, and very generous; but she is obliged to be firm, and limit her aid within certain bounds, else would Mrs. Hellicar run ceaselessly and wildly into debt, confidently appealing to Esther whenever she became embarrassed, which would be on an average about twice in the twelvemonths.

CHAPTER LVII.

MRS. DIGBY IS APPEASED.

THAT winter was a period of reunion and happiness, for Florence and Fanny were in London, and living within a few doors of the Bethunes; they saw each other continually, and there was no cloud between Florence and Esther, they were all the firmer friends for the fierce ordeal through which as friends or rivals they had passed. And Edith, too, was in town, keeping house for her brother, and helping him in furnishing, and other necessary preparations. Also she was contemplating marriage on her own account. She was engaged to a literary friend of Lancelot's, and the friend was not only literary, but rich. His name was Philip Auriol, and he was the brother—though younger by many years—of the Dean of St. Beetha's. And the goodly estate of Arne, near that fair cathedral city, was his own, left him as a legacy of love by one to whom he had been for four long sad years betrothed. Helen de Torre, wealthy, young, beautiful, and beloved, had passed from earth ere the summer of her days was reached. Philip was to have been her husband, and they loved one another dearly; but it was God's will that as husband and wife they should never rule at Arne. Helen suffered much; but for many months she hoped and believed that her illness, the result of a serious accident, *would come to an end, and that health, if not bodily vigour,*

would be restored, and that she would be justified in giving herself wholly to the man she loved and honoured.

But it was not to be: long confinement to her couch produced fatal disease, and Helen died, leaving her beautiful estate to Philip, and bidding him carry out her cherished plans for the good of the people now committed to his care. Also she begged him to marry when in the fulness of time the anguish of his loss should be assuaged. And so the sweet saint went to heaven, and Philip mourned her long and bitterly.

So deep, so abiding was his grief for her in whom every hope and joy had centred, that it seemed to him as if his widowed heart would never cling anew to any earthly object of affection. But Time heals many a wound that Death has made, and, as years passed on, Philip grew calm and even happy, and learned to hope once again; and in carrying out and perfecting with all his powers his lost Helen's liberal schemes, he awoke once more to the interests of the outside world, and entered into pursuits which befitted his age and his position. The duties he had assumed, and which he discharged most faithfully, occupied his time very fully; but his leisure, when he had any, was given to literature, to which he had once intended to devote himself. He knew and greatly admired Lancelot Digby, and he soon learned to know and esteem his sister Edith, and the three were on very friendly terms. By-and-bye, it came to pass that Mr. Auriol found himself lonely and dispirited, Edith having returned to Helmsley, and then it occurred to him that he was regarding her with an interest far exceeding that of ordinary friendship; she was more to him than any woman had been since Helen's death, five years ago, the only woman who had at all occupied his thoughts.

Edith was fair, and good, and gentle, though she had not Helen's imperial loveliness, nor her lofty strength of character; but she was sensible as well as "sweet looking," which Oswald had always said was the epithet which suited her. The discipline of her youth had taught her patience, and given her the energy which might otherwise have been wanting; while all — even her selfish, unreasonable step-

mother—recognised the sunny brightness of her disposition. And the younger family declared the Grange would be the dullest place on earth when that tiresome Mr. Auriol took Edith away for good and all.

“What he wants her for,” said Rowley, “I can’t think! There must be plenty of nice ladies at St. Beetha’s and in London, where he lives now part of the year. Why should he come and take our sister from us?”

And Edith promised to have them very often at Arne and in Brook street, where Mr. Auriol’s town house was. Of course Mrs. Digby lamented Edith’s departure; indeed, she resented the affair so much that she refused to speak to Edith when her engagement was announced; and was “just leading her a life,” as the boys said, when the squire interfered, and desired his foolish wife to behave herself more rationally, on pain of his lasting displeasure.

Money was more plentiful at Helmsley than it had been for many a day, for the squire gave his attention to the farming, and for two years running he had the most splendid crops in all the county. His grown-up sons were no longer dependent upon him; Cuddie could draw upon the paternal supplies no more; Lancelot had paid all Edith’s expenses in town, and sent her home suitably arrayed as Miss Digby, of Helmsley; while Rupert wrote frequent glowing accounts, not only of his prospects, but of hopes already realised. He had taken the tide of fortune at the turn; he had gone out to Australia under an unprecedented combination of favourable circumstances, and golden opportunities such as rarely present themselves—such as never perhaps present themselves to any man or woman more than once in a lifetime, had fallen to his share. And of every advantage he had fully availed himself, giving to his work that energy and self-denying, patient toil and personal attention without which no assured and lasting success can be attained. He was coming home in two years’ time; Cecil would wait for him. He was coming home, he hoped and believed, with sufficient money to clear a goodly portion of the family estate, and to work the land, which he knew now had *excellent capacities*, as it had never been worked before. And

I may as well add here that Rupert did fulfil all his promises. He came back richer even than any one had expected, and he and Cecil married at once and lived at the Chenies, and the squire grew young again as his pockets grew heavier and his heart lighter, and he held up his head in the county at last as became the master of Helmsley Grange. And Mrs. Digby's health improved, though she still prides herself on her delicate health, and treats her friends to a *catalogue raisonnée* of her maladies and their treatment whenever they can be prevailed upon to listen.

But all this came to pass later than the limits of my story, for it was only last year, indeed, that Cecil and Rupert married, and it was only during this last summer that Mr. Digby began to act as magistrate and to take upon himself the duties of his position as lord of the soil. As for entering into society, that is not to be thought of for manifold reasons; Mrs. Digby would be sadly deficient as lady of the Grange, and the squire has grown to feel ashamed of her laziness, and bad taste, and her want of tone. He cannot disguise from himself that his second marriage has been a mistake. Mrs. Digby is not exactly a lady, and, what is worse still, she is a selfish, self-absorbed woman, not overburdened with common sense, and not likely to improve as she grows older. Rose is not to be sacrificed as Edith was for so many years; her father has said it, and his wife knows now that his word must be respected. She has come to the conclusion that he is perfectly heartless, for neither hysterics nor sulks, fainting fits, palpitations, nor perpetual tears and reproaches, avail to turn him from his purpose. So Rose has just been sent to an excellent school near London, and when the right time comes she will be brought out with all the honours due to Miss Digby, by her sister, Mrs. Philip Auriol.

But now to revert to Esther and Florence, in whom I hope you are still interested. They saw very much of each other during the winter, and in February, when Florence found that some small matters of her own called her to Little Guise, Esther accompanied her, and Fanny Tucker remained with Madame Bethune. Esther had never visited Little

Guise, but she thought it now, even in its winter array, one of the fairest spots she had ever seen. What would it be in all its spring brightness, in its summer glory, and with its brilliant autumnal colouring! Fanny had absolutely raved about those woods, sweeping over the low hills, and about those lovely glimpses of sea upon which, roaming through the beautiful grounds, one came continually. Fanny was not to return to Paris with Madame Bethune, oh, no! She was coming back to Florence and to Little Guise, where she meant to stay all her life; "for," as she argued, "even if Flossy marry she will want some one to be housekeeper at Little Guise; she will always like it kept up, I am sure." And Madame replied, "But my dear Miss Tuckaire, whoever marries Florence will probably live at Little Guise."

"I think not," said Fanny, with one of her peculiar smiles, which were often as puzzling as they were charming to beholders. And then the conversation ended.

But oh, the joy of being at Chilcombe once more! Cecil came and fetched both her cousin and Esther to the Chenies before they had been a week at Little Guise, and Esther almost cried with happiness when they drove by the Slade Farm, and saw Mrs. King stooping over her borders, busy among her earliest spring flowers. And Esther had her old room at the Chenies, though many luxuries and many pretty things were added that had not been there when she had slept in it for the first time, on the night of her arrival at Chilcombe. How like a dream it was! how real, and yet how unreal, all that had passed since that coming to the Chenies. She remembered taking her solitary supper in the breakfast-room; she remembered the impertinence of Miss Amelia Matilda, and her own extreme depression thereat; and when in the morning she drew up her blind, she saw just the same broad expanse of bare fields and leafless woods, and wavy heath and hills, with the golden light shining on the far-off line of glittering sea, as she had seen when, with sinking heart, she had for the first time looked on that wide, lovely landscape. How often and how vividly she had recalled that scene, and other scenes still fairer and still dearer, during the first long months of her Paris exile. And

oh ! that terrace-garden at Helmsley ! how often and how often she had pictured it to herself just as she had seen it in the roseate glow of the August Sunday evening. And now Lancelot was her own, and she was to be his wife in about three months time. Truly God had been very gracious to her. He had given her a goodly inheritance, and he had led her into pleasant places.

“ Oh ! to be worthy of the least of all these gifts,” she said to herself, as she stood at her window, thinking of the past and of the present gratefully, and hopefully and trustfully of the time to come. “ Oh ! the agony of that going away ! that terrible pain of parting ! Only God knew what suffering it was ! But He *did* know, and that was all the comfort ; for I was sure He would not let me feel one pang too many, or add one drop of needless bitterness to the cup He gave me to drink. God’s discipline is perfect ; man’s chastening often does more harm than good, unless as God uses it as a means to an end. Yes ! the grey time was the growing time ; the rain was a gracious rain ! And now that the golden days are come again — ay, more golden than I ever imagined ! — may I be as humble and as grateful, and live as near to God as when the dull grey clouds and the heavy mists were about my path.”

Esther did not let the day pass without seeing the Kings. She found the farmer and his wife both at home, and they received her literally with open arms.

“ And you will stop and have tea, my dear,” said Mrs. King, when they had had a good long talk about everything and everybody, as the good woman said.

“ Yes, if you will give me an early tea. There is a late dinner at the Chenies to-day ; the rector and his sister-in-law, Lady Maria, and some more people are coming. The engagement was made some time ago, and they could not be put off. It will do very well if I get home by seven.”

“ And so you are really going to be married ? ” said the farmer, when he had disposed of two mighty cups of tea, and of any quantity of thick buttered toast, and home-made muffins. “ And to think you will be Mrs. Digby, of the Grange ! Deary me ! deary me ! ”

"William," said Mrs. King, "you are making Esther think you don't like it."

"Ah, but I do! only it's wonderful how things do turn up. The Lord exalteth whom He will, and casteth down whom He will!"

"To be sure He 'does!" interposed Mrs. King; "but, whatever people may say, the Lord exalts those who best deserve it, and can best bear it. And He humbles those who want humbling. The good Lord likes to see people rejoice in what we call good fortune; but He don't like to see people 'stuck-up and proud and disdainful."

"And yet, my dear, some very stuck-up people do get exalted! Look at the Flashmans, of Stannington, with their carriages and horses, and all their grandeur!"

"That is not to be truly exalted," said Mrs. King; "I don't call carriages, and jewels, and fine dinners, and such like, *true* exaltation: they are stuck-up-ed-ness, if there is such a word, Esther, which I suppose there isn't."

"No, there is not; but I quite know what you mean. The best things are not those which show before the world; and I do think I have the best things. And, oh! Mr. King, do you remember telling me that poetry was 'no yield'?"

"No more I never thought it was! Why, the man that made 'The May Queen,' the Queen's own poet, gets but 200*l.* a year or thereabouts, and a cask of sherry."

"Ah! but his books are always selling, and they bring him in thousands a year."

"*Thousands* now! Do they really? And does Mr. Lancelot get thousands?"

"Not yet! but he is very glad to get hundreds. And he will be thought more and more of every year."

"Ah! perhaps the sherry will come to him some day! It's sherry out of the Queen's own cellar, I'm told! Who knows?"

"Who knows?"

"*God knows*," put in Mrs. King, with peculiar emphasis.

"Ah, yes! Oh, Mrs. King, that talisman! It went with *me everywhere*; it lifted me up when I sank down oppressed

with my burden ; it comforted me in every sorrow ; when things seemed as contrary as they could be I said to myself, 'God knows, I do not know ; but that is no matter, He knows, and He will order it all for my good, for He is my Father !' The child need not know ; it is quite enough that the father knows. I shall try to keep my talisman always ; for of course the grey days will come again. And I think one needs the talisman as a check in prosperity, just as one needs it as a comfort in adversity."

Mrs. Digby received Esther rather stiffly ; she was not pleased with Lancelot's choice. So popular and so courted as he was, she said, he might have married more eligibly. He ought to have secured good birth and a good fortune ; indeed, his duty to his family required him to marry money ! But she supposed it was of no use her speaking ; no one ever listened to her ; she was despised in her own house, and she might as well hold her peace.

"Just as well, and better, my dear," answered the squire, to whom sundry jerky little repinings had been addressed. "For my part, I think Lancelot has chosen very well ; I did not marry money with either of my wives, you know, so I can't scold Lance for following my example. Esther is a splendid young woman, with the air and style of a young duchess, and she is as good as she is handsome ; and, what is more, she loves our Lancelot, and he loves her, and that is the great thing, all the rest being equal."

"The great thing in novels, not in real life ; and the rest is not equal," said Mrs. Digby, fretfully. "Esther Kendall was once the village schoolmistress."

"And Louis Philippe was once a village schoolmaster !"

And the squire went off feeling rather huffy ; for, though Mrs. Digby in her maiden days had never condescended to earn a sixpence for herself, she was, as old Peter emphatically declared, "nobody of nowhere," whereas his former mistress, Lancelot's mother, was a "Compton of Compton ;" and it ill became her to find fault with Esther's antecedents.

But presently, to the surprise of everybody, Esther herself included, the Elsworthy Kendalls—"as out-and-out sort of people as any in the county," Peter said—came forward to

claim her as their cousin. It was quite true, incredulous as Esther was, and a little disdainful, which was only natural ; it was soon proved beyond a doubt that the father of the present possessor of Elsworthy—a really fine old place—and Esther's father were second cousins ; therefore, the present possessor and Esther herself were actually fourth or fifth cousins—it did not much matter which ; though Mrs. Digby declared it quite altered the case, and took at once to her stepdaughter-in-law elect, and made much of her as a well-born Kendall. They let her do it, and Esther meekly endured her patronage, and her wishy-washy caresses and expressions of attachment. The likes and dislikes of such weak creatures are about equally valuable.

But why did not Esther's kinsfolk claim her before ? Well, who would care to count cousins with the village schoolmistress ? It was quite another thing when she turned out to be the bride-elect of the heir of the Digbys. And *"men will praise thee when thou doest well unto thyself."*

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE POET'S WIFE.

ESTHER divided that spring between Chilcombe, Helmsley, and Little Guise. The days and weeks flew swiftly by, and the May bloom was on the trees again. It wanted only a fortnight to the 7th of June, which was fixed for her wedding, and she was spending a day or two quietly with Mrs. King, for Florence had gone up to town to bring Fanny home again, and Cecil had decided to accompany her, having herself, as she mysteriously observed, "business in London."

Esther had been to the school to see Mary Murrell, who was now fairly installed as mistress, the troublesome "Frumpington woman" having taken her departure, and, knowing that Mrs. King would be busy in her dairy till quite half an hour later, she determined to take a circuit through the fields, a favourite walk of hers during her residence at Chilcombe. She turned, however, out of the path she had

intended to follow, in order to gather some wild hyacinths, or English bluebells, with which a bank adjoining a little wood was covered, and seeing other flowers beyond which she wished to add to her bouquet, she went farther than she had intended, till at length, feeling rather tired, she sat down to rest on a fallen tree and began to arrange her pretty floral spoils. While thus occupied she heard a footstep on the soft, mossy path ; she looked up quickly, and there, standing before her, was Oswald Uffadyne ! Her first impulse was to rise and walk away, but a glance at Oswald's face reassured her ; she saw nothing there but the old friendliness which had been so pleasant in the first days of their acquaintance.

"I thought it was you," he said, colouring a little, yet stretching out his hand with a frankness which was not in the least lover-like. "I saw you turn into the wood, and I ventured to follow you ; for I had something I wished so very much to say. But first, may I ask, as an old friend, when your wedding-day is ?"

"This day fortnight," said Esther, blushing, but relieved that he asked so naturally.

"I am very glad of it," he replied ; "I need not say I wish you happiness. I know what you are, and Lance, dear old fellow, is without his peer ; two such people must make each other happy ! And now let me once more revert to the past—a past which I heartily regret because I gave you so much pain, and also because I wronged the one whom of all others on earth I ought to have shielded from insult and distress. Can you forgive me ?"

"A thousand times *yes*, Mr. Uffadyne ; I am too happy to be at feud with any one. All the trouble has worked out good for me, and for you some good I trust ?"

"The greatest, Esther. I was not worthy of Florence Guise. Had I married her three years ago she would have had an unstable, foolish, self-satisfied puppy of a husband ! I did not know her, and she, sweet soul, invested me with all sorts of ideal virtues and excellences, till I ruthlessly tore away the delusion, and showed myself to her as I really was. Esther, I have learned many a lesson since I

saw you two years since in the Rue St. Dominique, and they have been humbling lessons and painful lessons ; but I needed them, and I believe they have made me quite another man. And now I want to ask you is there, do you think, any hope for me ? Could Florence ever be induced to listen to me again ? ”

“ I do not know,” said Esther, gravely. “ One woman ought not to presume to speak for another on such a point. You might *try* ; I do not say you would succeed, neither could I assure you of failure. Only I must tell you your name is never mentioned among us.”

“ Does Florence know that I followed you to Paris ? ”

“ She does not ; I never told her. No one but Lancelot knows, except, of course, Madame Bethune, who would never speak. But if you go to her again I think you ought to tell her everything without reserve.”

“ I will. And you wish me God-speed ? ”

“ Most heartily. My cup of happiness would brim right over, I think, if Florence were as happy as myself.”

For Esther knew how dearly Florence still loved Oswald, in spite of all his faithlessness and their entire separation.

And two days afterwards Oswald humbly renewed his suit, and it was gently but firmly declined. In vain he pleaded. “ I dare not risk all again, Oswald,” she said, so quietly that his heart died within him. “ I dare not do it ; it is all over between us two, and it cannot, it must not, be renewed ! ”

“ Cannot we be dear friends ? ”

“ Not as you would have it. Friends I trust we shall ever be, for there is nothing but kindness in my thoughts towards you ; but we must be friends apart.”

And for a few days Florence was paler and quieter, and then Esther's wedding-day came, and no one was brighter or seemed more calmly content than Florence. And Esther and Lancelot went away up the Rhine, followed by the good wishes of all Chilcombe and Helmsley, and by the fervent prayers of many. Esther's presents were manifold ; and *when in July they reached their home in London, they*

found a magnificent pianoforte—a first-rate *Broadwood's*—in their front drawing-room, with a letter from Oswald to his “dear friends Lancelot and Esther Digby,” begging their acceptance of the instrument, and hoping some day to be received among their guests.

* * * * *

Esther had been married several months when Florence and Fanny came to stay a few days with her on their road home from Scarborough. It was to be a very quiet visit, and so to some extent it was, but it proved a very momentous one.

They arrived a day earlier than they were expected. “I knew we might take a liberty with you, Esther,” said Florence; “and our hostess was taken so ill I thought it best to leave at once; we could do no good, and we were manifestly in the way.”

“I am so glad you came,” was Esther’s prompt reply; “there are two or three people coming to-night—friends of my husband, Philip Auriol, and the editor of *Christendom* and his wife, and some one else, whom I do not know. You do not mind, I suppose?”

“My dear Esther, I shall be delighted to hear the lions roar, and Fanny is wild to see the editor, Mr. Gray. I remember, he married Ermengarde Liebrecht.”

The evening came, and the guests. The Grays were the last arrival, and they brought with them a gentleman who was their visitor—the person whom Esther said she did not know. He was introduced as Mr. Edward Trevor. He was a tall, melancholy man of thirty or thereabouts, and in deep mourning. He started when he saw Fanny standing by Mr. Digby, and Fanny, hearing the name, looked up from the photograph which occupied her, and turned deadly pale. A minute afterwards she was quite composed. “Mr. Trevor and I have met before; we are old acquaintances,” she said calmly, as she took the proffered hand. But both Florence and Esther knew that her serenity and forced cheerfulness all the evening cost her very dearly.

“My darling Fras!” said Florence, when she gave her

friend her good-night kiss. And Fanny was profoundly grateful that she asked no questions.

But next morning at breakfast Esther remarked that Mrs. Gray had told her about Mr. Trevor. She liked him very much; he had married unhappily, but now his wife was dead; it was for her that he was wearing the deep band on his hat. No more was said, but later in the day Mr. Trevor came again, and boldly asked for Miss Tucker. An hour or two afterwards Fanny told Florence all the story of the unfortunate attachment. Of course it was to Mr. Trevor, and neither had been to blame, for unjustifiable interference and indeed absolute treachery had been at work to effect their separation. Trevor, believing that Fanny was lost to him for ever, suffered himself to be drawn into an engagement with a woman whom he knew loved him; "at least he might make her happy," he told himself. But Mrs. Trevor was never happy. She had shared in the deceit which had broken off what she called "the old affair," and she always dreaded the detection that might ensue.

And it did ensue. In due course her punishment came. All was disclosed to her injured husband, and she felt that she had lost the slight hold on his affections which as his wife she had possessed. He pitied her, and he was kind to her; but she knew she was unloved. And she could not reproach him, for she had gained him by treachery, and now he knew it all—her want of honour, of common principle, and her selfish cruelty to himself.

"And now you will make him happy?" said Florence, when Fanny had ended.

"Could I do otherwise?" answered Fanny, weeping in her friend's arms. "Am I not the most ungrateful creature?"

"You would be if you refused him. Fras, dear, you shall have the most splendid wedding-veil that any bride has worn for ages, excepting, of course, the Princess's. Heigho! everybody is getting married! I did think I might rely on Cecil, and there she is, only waiting till Rupert comes home to be joined together in the house of bondage, as that delightful Captain Cuttle has it. I really think I

shall adopt some nice little girl and train her up to voluntary old-maidism, so that I may insure an agreeable companion."

"And before she is five-and-twenty she will implore your blessing upon her union with the curate. No, Flossy, you must *do better* than that."

Whether Florence would have done better, if something had not happened—something which at the time seemed very terrible—I really dare not affirm. But Oswald had an accident; he was in a certain railway-train when it ran off the line, and tumbled the passengers down a steep embankment, some of them into a rapid river! Several were killed, some injured for life, and many cruelly hurt; only a few escaped with "simple bruises and contusions!" Oswald had an arm broken and a shoulder dislocated, and for a long time his recovery seemed doubtful, fever having set in almost immediately.

Sometimes he was wildly delirious, sometimes unconscious; and Cecil wrote heart-rending letters to Florence, which made her so intensely wretched that Fanny proposed they should both go down to the scene of action and help Cecil to nurse the invalid. Florence did not need much persuasion; she went, and nearly lost all hope when she saw the patient, so sadly was he altered, so alarming were the symptoms, the physicians fearing injury to the brain. But Oswald was not to die; he was to live and be happy. The cares of his tender nurses and their earnest prayers prevailed, and at length he rose up from that bed of suffering weak, wan, and emaciated, but fairly on the road to recovery. And no one was surprised when, several days after his convalescence seemed assured, Florence announced herself as once more engaged to Oswald Uffadyne!

"Thank God! now I can forgive myself!" cried Cecil, when she heard the happy tidings.

"And now I can leave you with a clear conscience!" said Fanny. "Now I will not plague Edward any longer; I will name the day next time he urges it! But he must wait till April."

And Oswald and Florence waited till April, and no longer;

so that Fanny and Florence were both brides on the same day. Mr. Digby gave both brides away, and Lancelot came down for the wedding, stopping at Helmsley only one night, for Esther could not leave London, she had to stay at home and take care of her baby boy, whom his papa unpoetically declared to be "the funniest little customer he ever saw." Esther sent word that he was a beauty, and so strong and *intelligent* for a fortnight old.

"After that I give her up," said Cecil. "I wonder if I shall ever think a baby of two weeks old anything but an ugly, troublesome, unmeaning little thing. Why, even Lancelot said he had never heard a baby cry so musically. Heaven help these silly young papas and mammas, and preserve them in their senses!"

And Lancelot went back home to his treasures, and told his wife what Cecil had said.

"Ah, she will tell another tale some day," said the happy young mother. "I never thought a baby could be such a comfort till this darling came to me. Oh, Lancelot, while you have been away I have been thinking over the last five years, beginning with the final summer I spent in Queen Square and ending with your good-bye kisses and the feel of my baby sleeping on my arm; and I said over nice little pieces of your poems to myself."

"Ah, 'Grey and Gold' is going into another edition, the publishers tell me. Do you remember that evening in the Terrace-garden, my dear?"

"Do I not? I can see it now,—the rich, purpling woods, the dazzling, golden sands, and the pink clouds, floating from the west."

"God has been very good to us, Esther."

"Indeed He has. If we can but praise Him as we ought, with our lips and with our lives!"

"And we must try to teach others the blessed lessons we have learned, and our key-note ought to be, 'Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass.'"

"And He will guide us, so that we rest in Him and wait

patiently for Him in all trials and all perplexities, till the last grey day declines, and we see before us the golden hills of heaven."

THE END.

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